



# Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



MONDAY — 24 JAN 2022

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## Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Chicago schools change Covid tracking</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://komonews.com/news/coronavirus/questions-raised-after-chicago-schools-change-covid-data-tracking">https://komonews.com/news/coronavirus/questions-raised-after-chicago-schools-change-covid-data-tracking</a>
GIST	<p>CHICAGO (AP) — The nation's third-largest school district has quietly changed how it <a href="#">tracks COVID-19 in schools</a>, renewing concerns about the accuracy and transparency of data used to make decisions during the <a href="#">pandemic</a>.</p> <p>Chicago Public Schools officials recently acknowledged the district altered how it notes school infections after an outside observer found discrepancies with an online tracker, according to The Chicago Sun-Times.</p> <p>Jakob Ondrey, a parent and former children's hospital employee, runs a website tracking school COVID-19 cases by getting raw data from district servers. His analysis posted Thursday on social media found district-wide totals were updated as usual, but school-level cases were going unreported, making infections at individual schools appear lower. Parents have been complaining for weeks that infection updates they receive from principals at individual schools don't appear in the district's online tracker.</p> <p>CPS officials responded by saying the change made Dec. 20 was intentional but wasn't meant to mislead. District officials said they've started listing cases that have been verified by the contact tracing team to improve accuracy and protect privacy.</p> <p>However, the disclosure prompted fresh questions about the district's data, which has been criticized as inaccurate. The change came amid <a href="#">a standoff over pandemic safety protocols</a> with the Chicago Teachers Union that canceled five days of classes earlier this month.</p> <p>"In a battle between the union and CPS, the opinion of parents is what wins the war, right? And that's a way to win the war — for parents to say, 'Oh, my kid's school is fine and I want my kid to go back to school, and I don't necessarily care about these other schools,'" Ondrey said.</p> <p>District officials said they'd again evaluate their methods.</p> <p>"In light of the Omicron surge and in the interest of broader transparency, we are re-evaluating our data reporting and exploring reporting all open reported cases as well as closed cases at the school level," district officials said.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/24 US carriers enter South China Sea</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.newsmax.com/newsfront/taiwan-south-china-sea-incursion-carriers/2022/01/24/id/1053652/">https://www.newsmax.com/newsfront/taiwan-south-china-sea-incursion-carriers/2022/01/24/id/1053652/</a>

GIST	<p>Two U.S. aircraft carrier groups have entered the disputed South China Sea for training, the Department of Defense said on Monday as Taiwan reported a new Chinese air force incursion at the top of the waterway including a fearsome new electronic warfare jet.</p> <p>The South China Sea and self-governing Taiwan are two of China's most sensitive territorial issues and both are frequent areas of tension between the United States and China.</p> <p>U.S. Navy ships routinely sail close to Chinese-occupied islands in the South China Sea to challenge Chinese sovereignty claims, as well as through the Taiwan Strait, to Beijing's anger.</p> <p>The U.S. Department of Defense said the two U.S. Navy Carrier Strike Groups, led by their flagships USS Carl Vinson and USS Abraham Lincoln, had begun operations in the South China Sea on Sunday.</p> <p>The carrier groups will carry out exercises including anti-submarine warfare operations, air warfare operations and maritime interdiction operations to strengthen combat readiness, it said in a statement.</p> <p>The training will be conducted in accordance with international law in international waters, the Department of Defense added, without giving details.</p> <p>"Operations like these allow us to improve our combat credible capability, reassure our allies and partners, and demonstrate our resolve as a Navy to ensure regional stability and counter malign influence," it quoted Rear Admiral J.T. Anderson, commander of the strike group led by the USS Abraham Lincoln, as saying.</p> <p>Both carrier groups were reported on Sunday by the U.S. Navy to have been exercising with Japan's navy in the Philippine Sea, an area that includes waters to the east of Taiwan.</p> <p>The news of the U.S. operations coincides with Taiwan reporting the latest mass incursion by China's air force into its air defense identification zone - 39 aircraft - in an area close to the Taiwan-controlled Pratas Islands in the northern reaches of the South China Sea.</p> <p>Taiwan on Monday reported a further 13 Chinese aircraft in the zone, with one, an anti-submarine Y-8, flying through the Bashi Channel which separates Taiwan from the Philippines and connects the Pacific to the South China Sea, according to a map provided by Taiwan's Defence Ministry.</p> <p>The ministry added that two Chinese J-16Ds took part in the mission, though kept close to China's coast, a new electronic attack version of the J-16 fighter designed to target anti-aircraft defenses of the sort Taiwan would rely on to fend off an attack.</p> <p>China has yet to comment, but has previously said such missions are aimed at protecting its sovereignty and to prevent external interference in its sovereignty claims over democratically-governed Taiwan.</p> <p>Security sources have previously told Reuters that China's flights into Taiwan's defense zone are also likely a response to foreign military activity, especially by U.S. forces, near the island, to warn that Beijing is watching and has the capability to handle any Taiwan contingencies.</p> <p>Taiwan calls China's repeated nearby military activities "grey zone" warfare, designed to both wear out Taiwan's forces by making them repeatedly scramble, and also to test Taiwan's responses.</p> <p>The South China Sea, crossed by vital shipping lanes and also containing gas fields and rich fishing grounds, is also claimed by Taiwan, while Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines claim parts.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 NATO deploys forces eastern Europe
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-business-vladimir-putin-europe-antony-blinken-1c3eee4895926233aa85ad52ef09d102">https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-business-vladimir-putin-europe-antony-blinken-1c3eee4895926233aa85ad52ef09d102</a>

BRUSSELS (AP) — NATO said Monday that it's putting extra forces on standby and sending more ships and fighter jets to eastern Europe, as Ireland warned that new Russian war games off its coast are not welcome given tensions over whether President Vladimir Putin intends to attack Ukraine.

The U.S.-led military organization said that it is beefing up its "deterrence" presence in the Baltic Sea area. Denmark is sending a frigate and deploying F-16 war planes to Lithuania; Spain will also send warships and could send fighter jets to Bulgaria; and France stands ready to send troops to Romania.

Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said NATO will "take all necessary measures to protect and defend all allies." He said: "We will always respond to any deterioration of our security environment, including through strengthening our collective defense."

The announcement came as European Union foreign ministers sought to put on a fresh display of resolve in support of Ukraine, and paper over concerns about divisions on the best way to confront any Russian aggression.

"We are showing unprecedented unity about the situation in Ukraine, with the strong coordination with the U.S.," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, who is chairing their meeting, told reporters in Brussels.

Asked whether the EU would follow a U.S. move and order the families of European embassy personnel in Ukraine to leave, Borrell said: "We are not going to do the same thing." He said he is keen to hear from Secretary of State Antony Blinken about that decision.

Britain on Monday also announced it is withdrawing some diplomats and dependants from its embassy in Kyiv. The Foreign Office said the move was "in response to the growing threat from Russia."

Ukraine's foreign ministry spokesman, Oleg Nikolenko, said the U.S. decision was "a premature step" and a sign of "excessive caution." He said that Russia is sowing panic among Ukrainians and foreigners in order to destabilize Ukraine.

Germany is monitoring developments, but German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock stressed that "we must not contribute to unsettling the situation further; we need to continue to support the Ukrainian government very clearly and above all maintain the stability of the country."

Arriving at the EU meeting, Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney said he would inform his counterparts that Russia plans to hold war games 240 kilometers (150 miles) off Ireland's southwest coast — in international waters but within Ireland's exclusive economic zone.

"This isn't a time to increase military activity and tension in the context of what's happening with and in Ukraine," Coveney said. "The fact that they are choosing to do it on the western borders, if you like, of the EU, off the Irish coast, is something that in our view is simply not welcome and not wanted right now, particularly in the coming weeks."

During Monday's meeting, which Blinken will attend virtually, the ministers will restate Europe's condemnation of the Russian military build-up near Ukraine, involving an estimated 100,000 troops, tanks, artillery and heavy equipment, diplomats and officials said ahead of the meeting.

They'll renew calls for dialogue, notably through the European-backed "Normandy format," which helped to ease hostilities in 2015, a year after Putin ordered the annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. Fighting in eastern Ukraine has killed around 14,000 people and still simmers today.

Should Putin move on Ukraine again, the ministers will warn, Russia would face "massive consequences and severe costs." Those costs would be of a financial and political nature. The EU insists that it stands ready to slap hefty sanctions on Russia within days of any attack.

Over the weekend, some of the member countries closest to Russia — Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — confirmed that they plan to send U.S.-made anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles to Ukraine, a move endorsed by the United States.

But questions have been raised about just how unified the EU is. Diverse political, business and energy interests have long divided the 27-country bloc in its approach to Moscow. Around 40% of the EU's natural gas imports come from Russia, much of it via pipelines across Ukraine.

Gas prices have skyrocketed, and the head of the International Energy Agency has said that Russian energy giant Gazprom was already reducing its exports to the EU in late 2021 despite high prices. Putin says Gazprom is respecting its contract obligations, not putting the squeeze on Europe.

The EU's two major powers appear most cautious. Germany's Nord Stream 2 pipeline from Russia, which is complete but yet to pump gas, has become a bargaining chip. French President Emmanuel Macron has renewed previously rejected calls for an EU summit with Putin.

Late last year, France and Germany initially expressed doubts about U.S. intelligence assessments that Moscow might be preparing to invade.

Late on Saturday, the head of the German navy, Vice Admiral Kay-Achim Schoenbach, resigned after coming under fire for saying that Ukraine would not regain the Crimean Peninsula, and for suggesting that Putin deserves "respect."

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban plans to meet with Putin next week to discuss a Russian-backed project to expand a Hungarian nuclear power plant.

Still, diplomats and officials said hard-hitting sanctions are being drawn up with the EU's executive branch, the European Commission. But they were reluctant to say what the measures might be or what action by Russia might trigger them.

The aim, they said, is to try to match the doubts Putin has sowed about his intentions for Ukraine with uncertainty about what any retaliatory European action might look like, or when it would come.

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HEADLINE	<b>01/24 Burkina Faso president held in mutiny</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/burkina-fasos-president-kabore-held-mutinous-soldiers-82435670">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/burkina-fasos-president-kabore-held-mutinous-soldiers-82435670</a>
GIST	<p>OUAGADOUGOU, Burkina Faso -- Burkina Faso's President Roch Marc Christian Kabore is being held by mutinous soldiers, two of the rebellious soldiers told The Associated Press by phone early Monday. They did not say where Kabore is being held, but said he is in a safe place.</p> <p>Gunshots were heard late Sunday night near the president's residence and in the early hours of Monday a battle took place at the presidential palace while a helicopter flew overhead. The roads of the capital were empty Sunday night except for checkpoints heavily guarded by mutinous soldiers.</p> <p>State news station RTB was heavily guarded on Monday morning.</p> <p>Fighting began on Sunday when soldiers took control of the Lamizana Sangoule military barracks in the capital, Ouagadougou. Civilians drove into town in a show of support for the rebellion but were broken up by security forces firing tear gas. The mutiny came a day after a public demonstration calling for Kabore's resignation, the latest in a series of anti-Kabore protests as anger has mounted over his government's handling of the Islamic insurgency.</p> <p>The government has not made any statements since Sunday when Minister of Defense Aime Barthelemy Simpore told state broadcaster RTB that a few barracks had been affected by unrest not only in</p>

Ouagadougou but in other cities, too. He denied, however, that the president had been detained by the mutineers, even though Kabore's whereabouts was unknown.

"Well, it's a few barracks. There are not too many," Simpore said.

Kabore had been leading Burkina Faso since being elected in 2015 after a popular uprising ousted longtime strongman President Blaise Compaore who was in power for nearly three decades. Kabore was reelected in November 2020 for another five-year term, however, frustration has been growing at his inability to stem the spread of jihadist violence across the country. Attacks linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State group are escalating, killing thousands and displacing more than an estimated 1.5 million people.

The military has suffered losses since the extremist violence began in 2016. In December more than 50 security forces were killed in the Sahel region and nine security forces were killed in the Center North region in November.

Angry mutinous soldiers told the AP that the government was disconnected from its forces in the field and that their colleagues were dying and they wanted military rule. The soldiers put a man on the phone who said that they were seeking better working conditions for Burkina Faso's military amid the escalating fight against Islamic militants. Among their demands are increased manpower in the battle against extremists and better care for those wounded and the families of the dead.

About 100 military members have planned the takeover since August, according to one of the mutinous soldiers. The organizers never met in the same location more than twice and always outside of the capital, he said. They used messaging apps like Signal, WhatsApp and Telegraph to plan, he said.

Regional experts say the Kabore government was overstretched but it's unlikely the mutiny will change anything.

"Burkina Faso's army is profoundly ill-equipped and unprepared for the war it's asked to fight. It's out of its depth. Its frustration with an equally out of its depth government is understandable. Regrettably, this (rebellion) is unlikely to improve anything," said Michael Shurkin, a former political analyst at the CIA and director of global programs at 14 North Strategies, a business intelligence consultancy based in Dakar, Senegal, who has concentrated on analyzing West Africa's Sahel region for 15 years.

With the weekend protests, Burkina Faso's population is already showing signs of supporting a takeover.

"People are tired with this situation of insecurity. Every day people are killed. In Burkina, there are areas that can't be accessed. We have lost a big part of our territory," said Jean-Baptiste Ilboudou a civilian near the military base where gunshots were heard.

The West African regional bloc known as ECOWAS, which already has suspended Mali and Guinea in the past 18 months over military coups, issued a statement of support for Burkina Faso's embattled president and urged dialogue with the mutineers.

Earlier this month, authorities had arrested a group of soldiers accused of participating in a foiled coup plot. It was not immediately known whether there was any connection between those soldiers and the ones who led this coup. Military prosecutors said nine soldiers and two civilians were being held in connection with the plot.

West Africa has seen a spate of military coups in West Africa over the past 18 months, causing ECOWAS to suspend two member states simultaneously for the first time since 2012.

In August 2020, a mutiny at a Malian military barracks led to the democratically elected president being detained. He later announced his resignation on national television, and the junta leader there doesn't want to hold new elections for four more years.



	<p>In September 2021, Guinea’s president also was overthrown by a military junta that remains in power.</p> <p>Burkina Faso, too has seen its share of coup attempts and military takeovers. In 1987, Compaore came to power by force. And in 2015, soldiers loyal to him attempted to overthrow the transitional government put into place after his ouster. The army was ultimately able to put the transitional authorities back in power, who led again until Kabore won an election and took office.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Protest against vaccine mandates</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/protesters-march-in-d-c-against-covid-19-vaccine-mandates-11642963718?mod=hp_listb_pos2">https://www.wsj.com/articles/protesters-march-in-d-c-against-covid-19-vaccine-mandates-11642963718?mod=hp_listb_pos2</a>
GIST	<p>Protesters rallied in the nation’s capital Sunday against government mandates for Covid-19 vaccinations, a sign of the challenges for public-health officials looking for <a href="#">ways to persuade more Americans</a> to get the shots.</p> <p>Protesters marched along the National Mall and gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial, despite cold temperatures Sunday morning.</p> <p>The organizers said they would be protesting mandates, not vaccines themselves. “Since the vaccines do not stop people from getting sick, why should we impose them as a requirement to keep one’s job or to enjoy the freedoms that we have always enjoyed such as eating at a restaurant, going to a concert, or attending school or the university?” said Louisa Clary, an organizer, in an email.</p> <p>Vaccines and booster shots offer superior protection from the Delta and <a href="#">Omicron variants of the Covid-19 virus</a>, according to three new studies released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>In one of the studies published Friday, a <a href="#">CDC analysis found that a third dose</a> of either the vaccine from <a href="#">Pfizer</a> Inc. and <a href="#">BioNTech SE</a> or <a href="#">Moderna</a> Inc. was at least 90% effective against preventing hospitalization from Covid-19 during both the Delta and Omicron periods.</p> <p>“Those who remain unvaccinated are at significantly higher risk for infection and severe Covid-19 disease,” CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said Friday. “Protection against infection and hospitalization with the Omicron variant is highest for those who are up to date with their vaccination, meaning those who are boosted when they are eligible,” Dr. Walensky said.</p> <p>One of the speakers at Sunday’s march was Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who has criticized vaccines for years. During his remarks, Mr. Kennedy suggested people in the future won’t be able to escape surveillance, citing so-called vaccine passports, and suggested conditions would be worse than in Nazi Germany because he said some people could escape the Nazis.</p> <p>The Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum condemned his comments. “Exploiting of the tragedy of people who suffered, were humiliated, tortured &amp; murdered by the totalitarian regime of Nazi Germany—including children like Anne Frank—in a debate about vaccines &amp; limitations during global pandemic is a sad symptom of moral &amp; intellectual decay,” <a href="#">the museum said on Twitter</a>.</p> <p>The Biden administration has proposed increasingly strict measures to try to boost the <a href="#">nation’s vaccination rate</a> as variants of the coronavirus continue to cause infections and strain hospitals. Nearly 210 million people in the U.S. are fully vaccinated, roughly 63% of the U.S. population, according to the CDC.</p> <p>The administration has attempted to impose mandates, though some of their plans have run into legal obstacles. On Friday, a <a href="#">federal judge blocked</a> the Biden administration’s Covid-19 vaccine requirement for federal employees.</p>

Also this month, the Supreme Court blocked the administration's [Covid-19 vaccine-or-testing rules](#) for large private employers. The high court, however, allowed the administration to require vaccinations for healthcare workers whose facilities participate in Medicare and Medicaid.

Some state and local officials have ordered their own kinds of mandates. Earlier this month, Washington, D.C., began requiring people to show proof of Covid-19 vaccination to enter many indoor businesses.

Some two months since Omicron began its rapid spread around the world, areas of the U.S. hit early by the variant's spread have started to see some relief. Still, [hospitals in some states remain under significant strain](#), and infections have kept millions of people in the U.S. home sick or caring for someone with Covid-19 symptoms, while others say they are working despite illnesses.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, President Biden's chief medical adviser, said Sunday that most states could reach a peak of Omicron cases by mid-February. Speaking on ABC News' "This Week with George Stephanopoulos," Mr. Fauci said, "Even with Omicron, boosting makes a major, major difference in protecting you from hospitalization and severe outcomes."

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HEADLINE	01/23 Prices rising across the globe
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/01/23/inflation-global-prices-biden/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/01/23/inflation-global-prices-biden/</a>
GIST	<p>It probably isn't much consolation for Americans struggling with the highest inflation in 40 years, but they are not alone.</p> <p>In the European Union, prices are rising faster than at any time since the euro currency was introduced. The annual inflation rate in the United Kingdom hit 5.4 percent in December, the highest figure there in nearly 30 years. Canada's consumer prices are rising twice as fast as before the pandemic.</p> <p>Even in Japan, where prices have been depressed almost continuously since the collapse of the late 1980s real estate bubble, the central bank in recent days revised upward its assessment of inflation risks for the first time in eight years. Among major economies, only China has a lower inflation rate today than in early 2020.</p> <p>Around the world, soaring prices are emerging as a feature of the pandemic-era recovery, prompting some central banks to pivot to inflation fighting.</p> <p>The new focus caps an era since the 2008 financial crisis that saw global forces — such as the rise of <a href="#">cross-border supply chains</a> and a decline in workers' bargaining power — keep inflation subdued.</p> <p>As factories around the world revive at different speeds, a mismatch between the goods that are being produced and those that customers want to buy is helping drive prices higher. Longer-term trends, such as increased protectionism, rising Chinese wages and the adjustment to a low-carbon economy, will put upward pressure on prices in the years ahead, according to research by the BlackRock Investment Institute.</p> <p>"We've come through a period where global forces were clearly disinflationary. We're entering a period, in the near term at least, where they are more likely to <a href="#">push inflation up</a> rather than down," said Eric Winograd, senior economist with AllianceBernstein in New York.</p> <p>In the United States, the Federal Reserve is weighing a complex blend of global and domestic factors as it prepares to tackle 7 percent inflation, the highest among all major economies. On Tuesday, the Fed's policymaking committee is expected to signal that rate hikes will begin in March.</p> <p>"Part of what we're seeing in the U.S. is very similar to, and echoed in, the rest of the world," said Nathan Sheets, global chief economist for Citigroup. "And part of it is unique to our circumstances and particularly to the strength of U.S. aggregate demand."</p>



Snarled global supply chains, afflicting ports in Rotterdam and Shanghai as well as in Los Angeles, are driving up costs around the world. Increasing commodities costs, including food and energy, are doing likewise.

Over the past year, global oil prices are up more than 55 percent. Nickel, used in automotive and aerospace plants, is up 27 percent. And coffee has almost doubled in price.

Those bills are hitting customers everywhere, including in the United States. Over the past year, prices of imports — especially food, fuel and industrial parts — have risen by more than 10 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. That was the largest one-year increase since 2007.

In response, major U.S. companies are hiking retail prices. Procter & Gamble, maker of Tide laundry detergent and Bounty paper towels, told investors last week that higher commodity costs represented a \$2.3 billion annual head wind while freight costs were up \$300 million. The company said it had raised prices in all 10 of its product categories, boosting profits.

White House officials have described inflation as a side effect from a [robust recovery](#), which should subside in the second half of this year. At the White House on Friday, [President Biden](#) nodded to global forces, including covid-19.

“During this pandemic, your pocketbook felt the consequences: inflation, higher prices,” the president said. “Whenever a factory shuts down in one part of the world, the production and shipments of goods to shops and homes and businesses all over the world gets disrupted.”

But Americans also are seeing more rapid inflation than elsewhere as a consequence of the structure of the U.S. economy and the nature of the lavish financial rescue deployed to fight the pandemic, some economists said.

Starting in March 2020, as the first lockdowns sent the economy into free fall, Congress approved a total of nearly \$6 trillion to keep Americans financially whole. Household balance sheets also were lifted by U.S. stock markets, which outperformed those in Europe and Asia.

U.S. household net worth has increased since the end of 2019 by nearly \$28 trillion, according to the Fed. Adjusted for inflation, Americans’ disposable income actually rose during the pandemic.

During the work-from-home era, millions of Americans shifted their spending from restaurants and movie theaters to the purchase of goods. Buying all those clothes and laptops and furniture and cars drove up prices on durable goods as suppliers struggled to keep pace with demand.

Over the past year, durable goods’ prices rose by 16.8 percent, more than four times the increase for services, such as restaurant dining, haircuts or medical care.

Outside the United States, the inflationary impulse is different. In sub-Saharan Africa, rising fuel costs meant more expensive fertilizer, which translated into higher food prices, according to the International Monetary Fund. With food making up 40 percent of consumption spending, inflation in the region last year leaped to 9 percent from 6 percent.

In Europe, E.U. job-retention policies paid employers to keep their workers on the job, although usually at less than 100 percent pay. So, unlike in the United States, where direct government checks drove a consumer spending boom, European consumption remains depressed, said Laurence Boone, chief economist for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, in a speech last week.

“The largest driver of inflation in the euro area is energy prices and we all know why: weather, low gas stocks and reserves, delayed maintenance in infrastructure, not enough investment, particularly in renewables, geopolitics, all of which cannot be resolved rapidly,” she said.

Indeed, monetary policy can't do much about energy shortages. So far, the European Central Bank is concentrating on reducing its monthly asset purchases from last year's average of 82 billion euros to 20 billion over the course of this year.

In contrast, the Bank of England last month became the first central bank in a Group of Seven nation to raise interest rates.

The anti-inflation fight could mean a rough ride for financial markets, as central banks reduce asset purchases and begin raising borrowing costs.

Many economists say the Fed will begin the first of several expected quarter-point increases in its benchmark lending rate in March. In anticipation of that move, all three major U.S. stock indexes are in the red so far this year, with the tech-heavy Nasdaq down more than 10 percent.

The Fed's move toward tighter monetary policy has implications beyond U.S. borders.

Higher U.S. rates would likely draw capital away from developing countries, unless they raise their rates to offer investors equally attractive returns. But if they do, they'll suffer weaker growth.

"If major economies slam on the brakes or take a U-turn in their monetary policies, there would be serious negative spillovers. They would present challenges to global economic and financial stability, and developing countries would bear the brunt of it," Chinese President Xi Jinping said last week in a virtual address to the World Economic Forum.

Several central banks, including those in Mexico and Hungary, raised interest rates last month. The Bank of Russia raised its key rate for the seventh time in 2021, citing a delayed harvest and a shortage of new cars.

Uncertainty over the pandemic's course also could keep international borders closed longer than anticipated, delaying the expected easing in price pressures, the Russian central bank's chief, Elvira Nabiullina, said last month.

In China, where the economy is slowing, the central bank cut key lending rates last week, amid worries over the impact of the omicron variant and upheaval in the debt-ridden property sector.

Some of the international influences on inflation are temporary. Supply chain disruptions eventually will sort themselves out. Covid is expected to fade from an emergency into a chronic irritant.

But other inflationary global forces are likely to be enduring, according to BlackRock Investment Institute.

The Biden administration is promoting the return of key supply chains to the United States, which will probably add to manufacturing costs.

China's working-age population, for years a source of low-cost labor for multinational corporations, is shrinking.

And the transition to a low-carbon economy will mean new, more costly energy sources.

To be sure, not everyone is convinced the effects will be that dramatic. Winograd expects annual inflation to hover near 2.5 percent in the next several years, up from the 1.8 percent average in the decade after the financial crisis.

But after all the economic surprises delivered by the pandemic, few are offering any guarantees.

"We haven't been here before," said economist Kristin Forbes of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

HEADLINE	01/22 When, how federal workers back to office?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/federal-workers-coronavirus/2022/01/22/74f530ba-78ad-11ec-9102-d65488c31bb1_story.html">https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/federal-workers-coronavirus/2022/01/22/74f530ba-78ad-11ec-9102-d65488c31bb1_story.html</a>
GIST	<p>Two months after the Biden administration's deadline for federal workers to be vaccinated against the <a href="#">coronavirus</a> so they could begin returning to the office, the government's plan to resume normal operations remains muddled.</p> <p>Even before a federal judge in Texas <a href="#">issued a preliminary injunction Friday</a> blocking President Biden's vaccine mandate for the civilian workforce of 2.1 million, many agencies had not mapped out when to bring employees back and how to keep them safe.</p> <p>About half the workforce is still working from home nearly two years into the public health crisis, after soaring cases of the omicron variant prompted agencies to scrap return-to-office plans intended to kick in after the new year. Most employees have no idea when they'll be back.</p> <p>And while the vast majority of the civilian workforce is vaccinated — a victory for the administration — <a href="#">tens of thousands of employees are not</a>. They are still inspecting meat, working airport security X-ray machines, guarding federal prisoners, tending to sick veterans and serving the public directly in other ways — some with testing requirements, some not — while decisions about protecting their colleagues and the public drag on in agency-by-agency negotiations.</p> <p>Officials say they're still contemplating how they'll deal with unvaccinated employees while keeping vaccinated colleagues and the public safe — whether by reshuffling jobs, sending unprotected staff members home to work or reconfiguring offices to keep them at a distance.</p> <p>Even a coronavirus testing program for those employees exempted from <a href="#">the president's vaccine mandate</a> won't begin for another month, after a similar testing effort last summer failed to get off the ground.</p> <p>"We're at a point in the pandemic when all the processes are out the window," said Chad Hooper, executive director of the nonprofit Professional Managers Association, which represents managers at the Internal Revenue Service, whose leaders recently warned the public to expect <a href="#">subpar service</a> this tax season. "Why is every function of the federal government having to develop a strategy independent of the other?"</p> <p>Some agencies have announced return-to-office plans that will still allow large swaths of their staffs to continue to telework a few days a week. The plans could change if virus transmission is high in certain areas of the country.</p> <p>Housing and Urban Development employees are scheduled to return March 14. The Environmental Protection Agency will require political appointees and high-level managers to begin going back Feb. 28, with another wave to phase in March 28, but there's no word yet on rank-and-file employees.</p> <p>The Social Security Administration, under intense pressure for months from Congress and advocates for the disabled to reopen its vast network of field offices, is scheduled to begin in-person service there in April. The administrative law judges who hear appeals of denied claims for disability benefits — and are now conducting hearings on the phone or through videoconferencing — will resume in-person work in May and June, the agency said last week.</p> <p>Other agencies are still negotiating over their returns, with the biggest hurdle finding agreement with unions, which must get 30 days' notice before employees return and have generally pushed for more time working remotely.</p>

“The Federal Government’s implementation of vaccination requirements for Federal employees has been an unequivocal success that has increased vaccination, saved lives, protected our workforce, and strengthened our ability to serve the American people,” Isabel Aldunate, spokeswoman for the Office of Management and Budget, which is helping oversee federal coronavirus policy, said in an email. She did not address specifics of the return plans.

The Texas ruling came four months after the White House announced that more than 3.5 million civilian employees and military personnel would be required to get vaccinated by Nov. 22. The mandate did not offer an option for them to be tested regularly instead, except for those granted waivers. As of December, 92.5 percent of federal workers had received at least one vaccine dose and another 5.5 percent had requested medical or religious exemptions, according to OMB.

Millions of contract employees who do business with the government face additional uncertainty: This month’s Supreme Court ruling blocking the administration’s vaccine-or-test rule for private companies left contractors to decide whether to backtrack on vaccine requirements and testing or keep in place their own mandates. Many also will have to comply with a hodgepodge of state and local policies.

Still pending is the Biden administration’s appeal of a ruling by a federal judge in Georgia that halted a White House requirement for vaccine mandates to be rolled into new federal contracts. On top of that, federal buildings have varying pandemic rules governing access by civilians and contract employees.

“It’s pretty hard when some people have to comply [with vaccine rules] and others don’t,” said David Berteau, president and CEO of the Professional Services Council, which represents about 400 federal contractors who employ hundreds of thousands of people around the country and abroad. “You can imagine what companies are going through trying to make sense of all of this.”

The government’s sheer size, as well as required union negotiations and due process requirements before any penalties for noncompliance are meted out, have added more complexity.

“We’re in this fuzzy phase right now on unvaccinated employees, and omicron has allowed agencies to hit pause on figuring that out,” said Nicole Cantello, an attorney at the Environmental Protection Agency who is president of Chicago-based Local 704 of the American Federation of Government Employees.

Holdouts have responded to the threat of discipline with increased vaccinations. But unvaccinated rates are higher in conservative areas of the country, including a significant share of the staff at agencies such as Veterans Affairs (11.5 percent); Agriculture (11.8 percent); Energy (9 percent); the Bureau of Prisons (17.5 percent); Homeland Security (10.5 percent) and Social Security (9.7 percent).

The administration said last fall that it would discipline and potentially dismiss holdouts, unless they received exemptions.

But discipline has been largely limited so far to “counseling” to coax compliance and to short suspensions, according to government officials. Agencies say they’re still sorting through tens of thousands of waiver requests, the majority on religious grounds, a process VA Secretary Denis McDonough last week acknowledged is moving slowly at his agency.

“The goal is shots in arms,” McDonough said. Of disciplinary measures, he added, “I’m not in any rush to execute this.”

He said VA does not intend to question the legitimacy of either medical or religious exemption requests and plans to grant them, allowing unvaccinated employees to wear masks, socially distance and be tested regularly. In some health-care settings, including nursing homes, and cancer and spinal cord injury wards, employees could still lose their jobs, McDonough said, although that has not happened.

Other officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss personnel decisions, say they also do not envision firing hundreds or even thousands of employees in their agencies, but are leaning toward granting waivers.

About 7,000 of 36,000 employees of the federal prison system have requested religious or medical waivers, Bureau of Prisons spokeswoman Kristie Breshears said. The agency has made rulings in half the cases. Breshears declined to say how many were granted or denied.

The bureau “is committed to ensuring the safety and security of all inmates in our population, our staff, and the public” and requires unvaccinated staff to test, wash hands, wear masks and employ social distancing, Breshears wrote in an email.

Unvaccinated federal air marshals could soon face real repercussions. The Transportation Security Administration determined in December that marshals could generally not be granted religious accommodations in part because of the barriers their status poses to international travel, a requirement of the job. Some countries limit entry to vaccinated travelers, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advises the unvaccinated to quarantine after returning from overseas.

Instead, according to an agency memo obtained by The Washington Post, marshals will be able to transfer into different roles at the same or lower pay, or be subject to “nondisciplinary removal.” To date, no marshals have been reassigned, TSA spokesman R. Carter Langston said.

The TSA said Friday that it had 3,000 employees with active covid cases, roughly double the figure at the beginning of the year. It has closed some checkpoints in at least one airport but says the impacts have been minimal.

About 5,500 employees across the TSA sought waivers as of December, according to a memo signed by Administrator David P. Pekoske. Panels of senior staff members are evaluating the requests, Langston said. Another 3.8 percent of the staff that have neither sought waivers nor been vaccinated have received letters of counseling but no further discipline.

The Defense Department, with the largest civilian workforce of about 760,000, has started its exemption process, spokesman Army Maj. Charlie Dietz said. The department is not yet ready to provide initial numbers of requests, he said.

Uniformed service members have faced swifter action for vaccine refusal. About 3,000 soldiers had received letters of reprimand as of Jan. 11, the Army said, which in many cases would halt careers and in other cases would ultimately end them. The Marine Corps has discharged 334 Marines for vaccine refusal and the Air Force has ushered out 100 airmen, the services have said.

The Marine Corps recently approved two religious accommodation requests, the first among service members in the Defense Department. Thousands of troops have requested exemptions, but only a handful have been approved, with officials citing a need to balance religious and medical accommodations with mission requirements.

The Agriculture Department is balancing calls to vaccinate with a recognition that its workforce and its constituents live largely in red states, where many object to vaccines. Just 10 percent of agency employees work in the D.C. area.

“Much of our workforce lives in rural areas, so the vaccine hesitancy that has been documented in rural America very much applies to our employees,” said a USDA official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.

Some waiver requests have been approved, said the official, who did not offer details or say how the agency plans to deal with them.

The prospect of working side by side with unvaccinated colleagues is unsettling to many staffs that are already doing it.

“Everybody is masked, but there is no way to stand six feet apart in a processing plant,” said Paula Schelling-Soldner, chairwoman of the National Joint Council of Food Inspection Locals, which represents about 6,400 meat and poultry inspectors, a group that has worked through the pandemic. She said 600 to 700 of the workforce of 10,000 inspectors have applied for religious or medical exemptions.

VA, with about 40,000 holdouts, requires weekly testing for employees on medical staffs, a workaround that makes some colleagues uneasy.

“You could be tested on a Monday and get the virus on Tuesday and still be at work the rest of the week,” said Kelli Michels, a nurse and executive vice president of Local 3669 of the American Federation of Government Employees. The local represents the staff of the Minneapolis VA Health Care System, which has faced hundreds of absences because of the omicron variant in recent weeks.

The Safer Federal Workforce Task Force, which includes officials from the Office of Personnel Management, the White House and other departments, has urged agencies to start testing unvaccinated employees at least weekly by Feb. 15, either in the office, at outside locations or through self-administered tests that are verified.

Standing up such a system and potentially signing new contracts with outside providers poses a big challenge; a similar request to set up a testing system failed last summer. At the time, senior managers worried how to protect their staffs’ vaccination status, track testing results and quickly negotiate contracts, officials said.

“Do people have to get tested every day? Twice a week?” asked Jason Briefel, a partner at Shaw Bransford & Roth and executive director of the Senior Executives Association, which represents senior leaders in the government. “The testing situation last year clearly didn’t work. Setting these things up isn’t easy.”

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HEADLINE	01/23 SPD: 20% fully vaccinated hit by Covid
SOURCE	<a href="https://mynorthwest.com/3320820/rantz-concern-as-20-of-fully-vaccinated-seattle-police-hit-with-covid-this-month/">https://mynorthwest.com/3320820/rantz-concern-as-20-of-fully-vaccinated-seattle-police-hit-with-covid-this-month/</a>
GIST	<p>The fully vaccinated Seattle Police Department (SPD) suffered nearly 20% of its staff contracting COVID in just the first 21 days of January.</p> <p>The vaccine mandate, which sidelined nearly 100 officers for termination, was supposed to stop the spread of COVID. But the omicron variant evades the vaccine, and the mandate was a permanent “solution” to an evolving problem.</p> <p>And panic is setting in. The SPD is already experiencing a record low of deployable staff. Now, interim chief Adrian Diaz warns the department “can’t afford to have any more people get sick.”</p> <p>Dire staffing made worse by COVID</p> <p>In just 10 days, from January 11 through January 21, the SPD saw 114 vaccinated officers out with COVID, according to an internal memo obtained by the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH. The memo goes out to staff daily, offering updates on testing and the number of positive cases.</p> <p>According to a separate memo, dated January 21, Diaz confirmed that “nearly 20-percent of the department tested positive for COVID during the month of January alone, and dozens of officers are unavailable to work.”</p> <p>The department <a href="#">lost an astonishing 170 officers in 2021</a> and 180 in 2020. It left a depleted staff of just 880 deployable sworn Seattle Police Officers Guild (SPOG) members as of January 11. With only 36 officers</p>



not-yet-sworn, and 25 students participating in field training, the department is far short of its goal of 1,400-1,600 officers.

“The current state of Seattle police staffing is off the charts dangerous for our community,” SPOG President Mike Solan previously warned the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH.

The department already struggles to meet minimum staffing every day, in every watch, in every precinct across the city. Some days they don’t meet that minimum. Now, they have COVID ravaging the department, forcing the quarantine of officers, including those who are asymptomatic.

Passing out masks but denying accommodations

It doesn’t seem like the SPD can do much to stop the spread of omicron, since it evades the vaccines.

“Because the omicron variant is so easily spread, the City is providing medical grade face coverings for all employees,” Diaz wrote in the January 21 memo. “Please get yours, and please wear it. We can’t afford to have any more people get sick.”

Some health officials believe medical-grade masks help cut down transmission rates. But they also serve as a reminder that the city is still in the process of firing unvaccinated police officers (or those who do not want to turn in private medical paperwork). There was no testing option and a medical-grade mask option offered to accommodate these officers. They were told they posed a health risk: that they could catch and spread COVID to community members. They are no different than those who went through the vaccination process.

The vaccine mandate did not stop the spread of COVID. Indeed, the spread accelerated after the mandate. Yet there are no plans to rescind the order and bring back the much-needed officers.

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HEADLINE	01/23 ‘Going in right direction’ but cautious
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/23/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#fauci-omicron-peak">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/23/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#fauci-omicron-peak</a>
GIST	<p>Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, sounded cautiously optimistic on Sunday that the Omicron wave <a href="#">was peaking nationally in the United States</a> and that the coronavirus cases could fall to manageable levels in the coming months.</p> <p>“What we would hope,” Dr. Fauci, President Biden’s top medical adviser for Covid-19, said during an appearance on ABC’s “This Week,” “is that, as we get into the next weeks to month or so, we’ll see throughout the entire country the level of infection get to below what I call that area of control.”</p> <p>That did not mean eradicating the virus, Dr. Fauci said. Infections will continue. “They’re there but they don’t disrupt society,” he said. “That’s the best case scenario.”</p> <p>Similar to rapid rises and then declines in Omicron cases in South Africa and Britain, new cases in the U.S. are now dropping in the Northeast and upper Midwest. “There are still some states in the Southern states and Western states that continue to go up,” Dr. Fauci said, “but if the pattern follows the trend that we’re seeing in other places such as the Northeast, I believe that you will start to see a turnaround throughout the entire country.”</p> <p>As of Saturday, an average of more than 705,700 new cases were being identified every day, an increase of 8 percent over the last two weeks, <a href="#">according to a New York Times database</a>. Hospitalizations nationwide are averaging 159,500 each day, a record and an increase of about 25 percent. Average new deaths are now 2,152 a day, up 41 percent.</p> <p>“There may be a bit more pain and suffering with hospitalizations in those areas of the country that have not been fully vaccinated or have not gotten boosted,” Dr. Fauci said. <a href="#">Hospitals in several parts of the country are straining</a> to keep up after multiple surges and staffing shortages, including in Mississippi, where <a href="#">nearly all of the state’s acute-care hospitals have been pushed to capacity</a>.</p>

He advised that remaining ready for the possibility of what he called “the worst-case scenario” would be wise. “I’m not saying it’s going to happen, but we have to be prepared,” he said, describing that situation as “we get yet again another variant that has characteristics that would be problematic, like a high degree of transmissibility or a high degree of virulence.”

But overall, he said, “things are looking good. We don’t want to get overconfident but they look like they’re going in the right direction right now.”

Asked about possible fourth shots for Americans, Dr. Fauci said it was too early to know the durability of protection from the initial round of boosters. On Friday, data published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showed that Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccine boosters [were keeping infected Americans who had all three doses out of hospitals](#).

The United States, with only 63 percent of its population fully [vaccinated](#), lags other developed nations and has a sizable, and sometimes vocal, vaccine-resistant population.

On Sunday, thousands of demonstrators marched against vaccine mandates to the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., in a rally organized by a group called Defeat the Mandates: An American Homecoming. The rally drew conservatives and fringe groups across the political spectrum, including a wide range of conspiracy theorists.

Some demonstrators used holocaust imagery. Speakers included J.P. Sears, a conservative conspiracy theorist, YouTube celebrity and comedian; Dr. Robert Malone, an infectious disease researcher and a vaccine skeptic; and Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the political scion and prominent anti-vaccine activist.

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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Japan scrambles to provide booster shots</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/23/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#fast-rising-case-numbers-have-japan-scrambling-to-provide-booster-shots">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/23/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#fast-rising-case-numbers-have-japan-scrambling-to-provide-booster-shots</a>
GIST	<p>In November, it seemed that Japan might have found the solution to living with Covid-19. Nationwide, daily coronavirus case counts had dropped to nearly nothing, and a masked and vaccinated population went about daily life with little concern for the pandemic wreaking havoc in other nations.</p> <p>But now, the Omicron variant is sending case numbers skyrocketing to record highs, forcing the country to take emergency measures as it scrambles to provide booster shots to stave off the virus’s worst effects.</p> <p>Twelve prefectures and Tokyo moved on Friday to tighten restrictions on dining and drinking, following similar moves by other prefectures earlier this month. More are expected to announce such measures in the coming days, as the authorities worry that the surge could overwhelm hospitals.</p> <p>The restrictions, which include closing restaurants early and limiting the service of alcohol, are voluntary, like many of the other measures Japan has taken during the pandemic.</p> <p>The country’s daily case counts have multiplied by more than 100 since the beginning of January, setting another known record on Saturday at over 54,000. According to Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University, Japan has averaged 38,554 new cases a day.</p> <p>The first Omicron case was reported in late November, and cases began to rise rapidly in Okinawa at the start of the month. Officials there linked the outbreak to American military bases, whose personnel had been allowed to enter Japan without taking coronavirus tests on departure or arrival.</p> <p>Japan’s numbers, while small in comparison to the United States and Europe, are shocking for the country, which has had a relatively mild experience with the pandemic so far.</p>

	<p>Despite never implementing the kinds of hard lockdowns seen in China or Europe, Japan had managed to keep case counts low. The reasons remain unclear, but Japanese experts attributed the success to ubiquitous masking and public efforts to avoid what officials call the “three c’s”: close contact, crowded places and closed spaces.</p> <p>The country’s previous high came last August, when the daily case count topped out near 26,000 during a wave of the Delta variant.</p> <p>Deaths, too, remained comparatively low. As of Friday, the total for the pandemic numbered around 18,400, in a country of about 125 million people.</p> <p>That number has seen little recent movement. Nearly 79 percent of the population has received two shots of a Covid-19 vaccine, which are highly protective against death and hospitalization.</p> <p>But only 1.5 percent have received booster shots, raising concerns that the country may not be sufficiently prepared for the extremely transmissible Omicron variant.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 US orders embassy families out Ukraine</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/23/us/politics/ukraine-us-embassy-russia.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/23/us/politics/ukraine-us-embassy-russia.html</a>
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The State Department said on Sunday that it had ordered family members of U.S. Embassy personnel in Kyiv, Ukraine, to leave the country amid increasing concerns about a possible Russian invasion.</p> <p>The embassy will remain open for now, senior State Department officials said in a briefing with reporters, but some diplomats have been authorized to depart as well.</p> <p>The State Department also cited the possibility of Russian military action in keeping its travel risk advisory at Level 4, the highest category, urging U.S. citizens to not travel to Ukraine. The advisory was raised to that level last month because of concerns about Covid-19.</p> <p>The State Department officials said that the moves were made “out of an abundance of caution,” but that the United States would “not be in a position” to evacuate U.S. citizens should Russia invade Ukraine. Russia has stationed about 100,000 troops near the border of the neighboring country.</p> <p>“U.S. citizens in Ukraine should be aware that Russian military action anywhere in Ukraine would severely impact the U.S. Embassy’s ability to provide consular services, including assistance to U.S. citizens in departing Ukraine,” the State Department said in its travel advisory.</p> <p>Visa processing and most other consular services at the embassy will continue for the time being, officials said.</p> <p>The embassy is one of the larger American missions in Europe. It has about 900 employees total, the vast majority of them Ukrainians, some of whom have been with the mission since it opened three decades ago.</p> <p>The State Department officials said that they did not know how many American citizens are currently in Ukraine.</p> <p>Officials said they would review in 30 days whether family members had left and whether authorized personnel had chosen to leave. They urged all other Americans in Ukraine to use commercial and private transportation options to leave as soon as possible.</p> <p>The U.S. Embassy in neighboring Minsk, Belarus, <a href="#">issued a new alert on Sunday night</a> also urging Americans to stay away from public demonstrations and consider leaving the country amid “reports of further unusual Russian military activity near Ukraine’s borders, including the border with Belarus.” Last</p>

week, State Department officials accused President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia of moving troops, tanks and other equipment into Belarus and positioning them to invade Ukraine under the guise of conducting military exercises.

Britain on Saturday [accused Mr. Putin](#) of plotting to replace Ukraine's government with pro-Russian leaders, and the State Department has warned that Moscow could be planting false intelligence that could later be used to justify an invasion.

President Biden has been weighing [several options](#) that could expand America's military presence in the region, including the deployment of several thousand U.S. troops, as well as warships and aircraft, to NATO allies in the Baltics and Eastern Europe.

[William Taylor](#), a retired veteran diplomat who served twice as ambassador to Ukraine, said in an interview that he was not surprised by the State Department's decision. He said that conversations about a potential evacuation had been taking place for one to two months between the embassy and State Department headquarters in Washington.

"I think this is a prudent step," he said. "On the Russian side, there's the continued buildup, the continued massing of troops." He pointed out that the Russian military has missiles that can reach across Ukraine and weapons that can lob artillery shells deep into Ukraine.

And tensions could rise in the next week as the Biden administration steps up deterrence measures, said Mr. Taylor, who was most recently ambassador under President Donald J. Trump and testified in the former president's first impeachment hearing, which was centered on a pressure campaign by Mr. Trump involving Ukraine.

The State Department occasionally thins out staff at American embassies and consulates as a precaution when conflicts or other crises arise that could put U.S. diplomats in harm's way.

Officials in the Biden administration remain scarred by the sudden fall of Kabul, Afghanistan, to the Taliban last August, which resulted in the rushed evacuation of Afghan civilians, Americans and citizens of many other nations from the country.

Before the Taliban took over the city, Mr. Biden had said there would be "no circumstance" under which employees of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul would have to be evacuated by helicopter — a declaration made to calm fears of the kind of chaotic departure that occurred with the fall of Saigon to the North Vietnamese Army in April 1975.

Yet many people were transported by helicopter to the Kabul airport in August, with the scenes of panic and violence transmitted around the world.

Multiple U.S. embassies and consulates [ordered all but essential employees home in 2020](#) as the coronavirus swept around the world. The American Embassy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, was one of the most recent to do so, in November, as violence in that country's north threatened to overrun the capital. State Department officials have said the evacuation of the embassy in Kabul was a factor in that decision.

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HEADLINE	01/23 US troops to eastern Europe, Baltics?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/23/us/politics/biden-troops-nato-ukraine.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/23/us/politics/biden-troops-nato-ukraine.html</a>
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — President Biden is considering deploying several thousand U.S. troops, as well as warships and aircraft, to NATO allies in the Baltics and Eastern Europe, an expansion of American military involvement amid mounting fears of a Russian incursion into Ukraine, according to administration officials.</p> <p>The move would signal a major pivot for the Biden administration, which up until recently was taking a restrained stance on Ukraine, out of fear of provoking Russia into invading. But as President Vladimir V.</p>

Putin has ramped up his threatening actions toward Ukraine, and talks between American and Russian officials have failed to discourage him, the administration is now moving away from its do-not-provoke strategy.

In a meeting on Saturday at Camp David, the presidential retreat in Maryland, senior Pentagon officials presented Mr. Biden with several options that would shift American military assets much closer to Mr. Putin's doorstep, the administration officials said. The options include sending 1,000 to 5,000 troops to Eastern European countries, with the potential to increase that number tenfold if things deteriorate.

The officials spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk publicly about internal deliberations.

Mr. Biden is expected to make a decision as early as this week, they said. He is weighing the buildup as Russia has escalated its menacing posture against Ukraine, including massing more than 100,000 troops and weaponry on the border and stationing Russian forces in Belarus. On Saturday, Britain accused Moscow of developing plans to install a pro-Russian leader in Ukraine.

"Even as we're engaged in diplomacy, we are very much focused on building up defense, building up deterrence," Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said in an interview that aired Sunday on CBS's "Face the Nation." "NATO itself will continue to be reinforced in a significant way if Russia commits renewed acts of aggression. All of that is on the table."

So far, none of the military options being considered include deploying additional American troops to Ukraine itself, and Mr. Biden has made clear that he is loath to enter another conflict following America's painful exit from Afghanistan last summer after 20 years.

But after years of tiptoeing around the question of how much military support to provide to Ukraine, for fear of provoking Russia, Biden officials have recently warned that the United States could throw its weight behind a Ukrainian insurgency should Mr. Putin invade Ukraine.

And the deployment of thousands of additional American troops to NATO's eastern flank, which includes Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Biden administration officials said, is exactly the scenario that Mr. Putin has wanted to avoid, as he has seen the western military alliance creep closer and closer to Russia's own border.

The discussions came as the State Department ordered all family members of U.S. embassy personnel in Kyiv to leave Ukraine, citing the threat of Russian military action, and authorized some embassy employees to depart as well, according to senior State Department officials who briefed reporters on Sunday. The officials, who also spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment, declined to say how many embassy personnel and family members were in the country. Thinning out staff at American embassies is a common precaution when conflicts or other crises arise that could put American diplomats in harm's way.

In his news conference last week, Mr. Biden said he had cautioned Mr. Putin that a Russian invasion of Ukraine would prompt Washington to send more troops to the region.

"We're going to actually increase troop presence in Poland, in Romania, et cetera, if in fact he moves," Mr. Biden said. "They are part of NATO."

During a phone call this month, Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III warned his Russian counterpart, Sergey Shoygu, that a Russian incursion into Ukraine would most likely result in the exact troop buildup that Mr. Biden is now considering.

At the time of the phone call — Jan. 6 — the Biden administration was still trying to be more restrained in its stance on Ukraine. But after unsuccessful talks between Mr. Blinken and the Russian foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, on Friday, the administration is eyeing a more muscular posture, including not only

diplomatic options like sanctions, but military options like increasing military support to Ukrainian forces and deploying American troops to the region.

“This is clearly in response to the sudden stationing of Russian forces in Belarus, on the border, essentially, with NATO,” said Evelyn Farkas, the top Pentagon official for Russia and Ukraine during the Obama administration. “There is no way that NATO could not reply to such a sudden military move in this political context. The Kremlin needs to understand that they are only escalating the situation with all of these deployments and increasing the danger to all parties, including themselves.”

A former top Pentagon official for Europe and NATO policy, Jim Townsend, said the administration’s proposal did not go far enough.

“It’s likely too little too late to deter Putin,” Mr. Townsend said in an email. “If the Russians do invade Ukraine in a few weeks, those 5,000 should be just a down payment for a much larger U.S. and allied force presence. Western Europe should once again be an armed camp.”

During the meeting at Camp David, Mr. Austin and Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, appeared by video from the Pentagon and from General Milley’s quarters, where he has been quarantining since he tested positive for the coronavirus. Officials said that if Mr. Biden approved the deployment, some of the troops would come from the United States, while others would move from other parts of Europe to the more vulnerable countries on NATO’s eastern flank.

American officials did not describe in detail the ground troop reinforcements under review, but current and former commanders said they should include more air defense, engineering, logistics and artillery forces.

Besides the troops, Mr. Biden could also approve sending additional aircraft to the region.

Representative Michael McCaul of Texas, the top Republican on the Foreign Affairs Committee, said on Sunday that the United States also needed to conduct more training in those NATO nations.

“We need joint exercises in Poland, the Baltic States, Romania, Bulgaria, to show Putin that we’re serious,” Mr. McCaul said on “Face the Nation.” “Right now, he doesn’t see we’re serious.”

According to Poland’s defense ministry, there are currently about 4,000 U.S. troops and 1,000 other NATO troops stationed in Poland. There are also about 4,000 NATO troops in the Baltic States.

The United States has been regularly flying Air Force RC-135 Rivet Joint electronic-eavesdropping planes over Ukraine since late December. The planes allow American intelligence operatives to listen to Russian ground commanders’ communications. The Air Force is also flying E-8 JSTARS ground-surveillance planes to track the Russian troop buildup and the movements of the forces.

The Biden administration is especially interested in any indication that Russia may deploy tactical nuclear weapons to the border, a move that Russian officials have suggested could be an option.

More than 150 U.S. military advisers are in Ukraine, trainers who have for years worked out of the training ground near Lviv, in the country’s west, far from the front lines. The current group includes Special Operations forces, mostly Army Green Berets, as well as National Guard trainers from Florida’s 53rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team.

Military advisers from about a dozen allied countries are also in Ukraine, U.S. officials said. Several NATO countries, including Britain, Canada, Lithuania and Poland, have regularly sent training forces to the country.

In the event of a full-scale Russian invasion, the United States intends to move its military trainers out of the country quickly. But it is possible that some Americans could stay to advise Ukrainian officials in Kyiv, the capital, or provide frontline support, a U.S. official said.



HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Pakistan: only fully vax allowed in mosques</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/23/world/asia/pakistan-says-only-fully-vaccinated-people-will-be-allowed-in-mosques.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/23/world/asia/pakistan-says-only-fully-vaccinated-people-will-be-allowed-in-mosques.html</a>
GIST	<p>Pakistani officials have introduced a series of tough new coronavirus restrictions — including barring anyone not fully vaccinated from entering mosques for prayer — after recording the country’s highest known daily number of new cases since the pandemic began.</p> <p>The government banned indoor gatherings, including weddings, and ordered schools to be closed and contact sports canceled in any district where the test positivity rate exceeded 10 percent, a threshold that much of the country of 220 million has surpassed.</p> <p>The national test positivity rate stands at about 13 percent. Karachi, the port city of about 15 million people, recorded a positivity rate of 46 percent, meaning nearly one in every two tests was returning positive. In Islamabad, the capital city, nearly one in every five tests, or about 20 percent, was positive.</p> <p>According to Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University, the nation <a href="#">has averaged 6,208 new cases a day</a>. On Friday, the country recorded <a href="#">7,678</a> new cases, its largest known tally since the Covid-19 pandemic began. But public health experts say that total is likely an undercount.</p> <p>About <a href="#">78 million people</a>, about 36 percent of the population, have received two vaccine doses, according to government data. The government has taken stern measures — such as threatening to shut off cellphone service, hold back salaries, and prevent air travel — to increase vaccination numbers in face of widespread hesitancy.</p> <p>The requirements for mosques also include mandatory masks and six feet distance during prayer. When the government tried to impose similar measures last year, the resistance became violent on several occasions. In April, worshipers in Karachi pelted police vehicles with stones and attacked officers as they attempted to block them from entering mosques.</p> <p>“The government should focus on fulfilling its responsibility to vaccinate the people instead of deciding who will enter the mosques for praying and who would not,” said Qari Muhammad Usman, a religious leader in Karachi. “Preachers at mosques will not stop worshipers from coming to mosques because avoiding them would only invite God’s wrath at a time when people need his mercy.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 UAE intercepts ballistic missiles</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/23/united-arab-emirates-intercepted-ballistic-missile/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/23/united-arab-emirates-intercepted-ballistic-missile/</a>
GIST	<p>DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — The United Arab Emirates intercepted two ballistic missiles targeting Abu Dhabi early Monday, its state-run news agency reported, the latest attack to target the Emirati capital.</p> <p>The attack on Abu Dhabi, after another last week killed three people and wounded six, further escalates tensions across the Persian Gulf as Yemen’s yearslong civil war grinds on.</p> <p>That war, pitting Iranian-backed Houthi rebels against a Saudi-led coalition, has become a regional conflict as negotiations continue over Tehran’s tattered nuclear deal with world powers. The collapse of the accord has sparked years of attacks across the region.</p> <p>The state-run WAM news agency said that missile fragments fell harmlessly over the capital, Abu Dhabi.</p> <p>The Emirates “is ready and ready to deal with any threats and that it takes all necessary measures to protect the state from all attacks,” WAM quoted the UAE Defense Ministry as saying.</p>

	<p>Videos posted to social media show the sky over the capital light up before dawn Monday, with points of light looking like interceptor missiles in the sky. The videos corresponded to known features of Abu Dhabi.</p> <p>The missile fire disrupted traffic into Abu Dhabi International Airport, home to the long-haul carrier Etihad, for about an hour after the attack.</p> <p>No one immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. However, the attack came a week after Yemen's Houthi rebels claimed an attack on the Emirati capital that killed three people and wounded six others.</p> <p>In recent days, a Saudi-led coalition that the UAE backs unleashed punishing airstrikes targeting Yemen, knocking the Arab world's poorest country off the internet and killed over 80 people at a detention center.</p> <p>The Houthis had threaten to take revenge against the Emirates and Saudi Arabia over those attacks. On Sunday, the Saudi-led coalition said a Houthi-launched ballistic missile landed in an industrial area in Jizan, Saudi Arabia, slightly wounding a foreigner.</p> <p>A Houthi military spokesman did not immediately respond to questions from The Associated Press on Monday's attack.</p> <p>The hard-line Iranian daily newspaper Kayhan, whose editor-in-chief was appointed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, just Sunday published a front-page article quoting Houthi officials that the UAE would be attacked again with a headline: "Evacuate Emirati commercial towers."</p> <p>The newspaper in 2017 had faced a two-day publication ban after it ran a headline saying Dubai was the "next target" for the Houthis.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>01/23 China sends 39 warplanes toward Taiwan</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/23/china-sends-39-warplanes-toward-taiwan-largest-in/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/23/china-sends-39-warplanes-toward-taiwan-largest-in/</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>TAIPEI, Taiwan — China flew 39 warplanes toward Taiwan in its largest such sortie of the new year, continuing a pattern that the island has answered by scrambling its own jets in response.</p> <p>The formation Sunday night included 24 J-16 fighter jets and 10 J-10 jets, among other support aircraft and electronic warfare aircraft, according to Taiwan's defense ministry.</p> <p>Taiwan's air force scrambled its own jets and tracked the People's Liberation Army planes on its air defense radar systems, the defense ministry said.</p> <p>Chinese pilots have been flying towards Taiwan on a near-daily basis in the past year and a half, since Taiwan's government started publishing the data regularly. The largest sortie was 56 warplanes on a single day last October.</p> <p>The activity has generally been in the air space southwest of Taiwan and falls into what Taiwan's military calls the air defense identification zone, or air space it monitors out of national security considerations.</p> <p>Taiwan and China split during a civil war in 1949, but China claims the island as its own territory. As a result, Beijing opposes any action that would identify Taiwan as a sovereign state and has used diplomatic and military means to isolate and intimidate Taiwan.</p> <p>Tensions have been high since Taiwanese citizens elected Tsai Ing-wen as president in 2016, to which Beijing responded by cutting off previously established communications with the island's government. Tsai's predecessor was friendly to China and had endorsed Beijing's claim that the two are part of a single Chinese nation.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/23 EU official vows unity, rapid sanctions
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/23/eu-official-vows-rapid-sanctions-if-russia-launches-ukraine-military-attack">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/23/eu-official-vows-rapid-sanctions-if-russia-launches-ukraine-military-attack</a>
GIST	<p>The US secretary of state, Antony Blinken, has said he has no doubts Germany is maintaining a united front with Nato on the Ukraine crisis, on the eve of a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Brussels where they are expected to issue a further warning to Moscow over its buildup of 100,000 troops and heavy weapons along the Ukrainian border.</p> <p>There were alarm bells in Kyiv over the weekend after Germany's navy chief, Kay-Achim Schönbach, said Vladimir Putin deserved respect and also suggested it was "nonsense" to think Russia was ready to pour troops into Ukraine. Schönbach resigned on Saturday but his remarks rattled Nato, and Blinken did a round of talkshow appearances in an attempt to dampen concerns.</p> <p>"I can tell you that the Germans very much share our concerns and are resolute and being determined to respond – and to respond swiftly, effectively and in a united way," Blinken told NBC. I have no doubts about that."</p> <p>Blinken will brief the EU ministers by video link on Monday on his talks last week with the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, in Geneva.</p> <p>EU sources are pessimistic about the Kremlin climbing down from maximalist demands that would in effect give Russia a sphere of influence in eastern Europe. The ministers meeting on Monday, however, will not discuss specific sanctions. Instead they are expected to echo earlier EU warnings of "massive consequences" without going into specifics.</p> <p>"If such a very serious development [Russian troops crossing the border] happens, the reaction will be very quick, the reaction will be extremely clear. And again it will be a question of days ... not a question of weeks," a senior EU official said.</p> <p>The official predicted there would be an "even more remarkable" unity among the bloc's 27 countries than in 2014 when sweeping economic sanctions against Russia were adopted. "Yes, there are different sensitivities, but all member states have an acute sense of what is the European Union interest, which is at the end of the day a version of their national interest," the official said.</p> <p>Behind the repeated assertions of unity, it is no secret that western allies are divided. Joe Biden's comments that Nato allies would be "having to fight about what to do and not do" in the event of a "minor incursion" of Ukraine – comments that the White House subsequently rowed back on – were seen in Brussels as undiplomatic rather than untrue.</p> <p>In the EU, where sanctions have to be agreed by unanimity, differences are emerging. Germany's foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, has expressed doubts about cutting off Russian banks from the Swift global payments system, one option under discussion. Poland and the Baltic states, however, think it is a mistake to take anything off the table.</p> <p>Ukraine's foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, accused Germany over the weekend of not showing enough support for his country. Writing on Twitter, he expressed disappointment about Germany's apparent hesitations on Swift, its refusal to supply offensive weapons, as well as the comments from Schönbach.</p> <p>Writing before Schönbach's resignation was reported, Kuleba said: "German partners must stop such words and actions to undermine unity and encourage Vladimir Putin to a new attack on Ukraine."</p> <p>Kuleba's criticism of Germany's coalition government is shared by many in the European parliament, where a large majority last month called for sanctions against Russia to encompass exclusion from Swift, which is used in more than 200 countries and territories.</p>

“We should not be limiting the scope of various actions and thereby making it easier for Putin to have options for the violent alternative,” said Michael Gahler, a German MEP from the centre-right Christian Democratic Union party, which is not in power. Gahler, the parliament’s standing rapporteur on Ukraine, said it was “unfortunate” that Germany was not delivering offensive weapons to Ukraine.

Germany’s coalition government refuses to export weapons to conflict zones, in line with longstanding policy rooted in the country’s history.

In the event of war, Gahler also said the Nord Stream 2 pipeline connecting Russia to Germany should not come into operation. The MEP is urging EU officials to look into boosting gas supplies from southern pipelines and liquefied natural gas from the US.

But it is not just Germany that has raised questions about EU unity. Alarm bells were set off when it was announced last week that Hungary’s autocratic prime minister, Viktor Orbán, would meet Putin on 1 February to discuss a planned Russian-built nuclear power station in Hungary, the Sputnik vaccine and Hungary’s gas supply contracts.

While potential sanctions against Russia are a closely guarded secret, it is clear there is a sliding scale of options, with the harshest measures being considered for a full-scale attack.

Diplomats say a large-scale invasion is likely to make an EU decision simpler, as it would bring the bloc together in a large-scale response, just as the downing of flight MH17 in July 2014 bolstered unity on sweeping economic sanctions. The EU would face a more complex choice if Russian pursues other forms of aggression.

Countries will also weigh how sanctions would affect their economic interests. “Individual member states are more generous with the sanctions that hurt them less than others,” a senior diplomat said. “That is the name of the game a little bit.”

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HEADLINE	01/23 Study: 1 <sup>st</sup> wave infections loss sense smell
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/jan/23/nearly-half-of-first-wave-covid-cases-may-suffer-lasting-harm-to-sense-of-smell">https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/jan/23/nearly-half-of-first-wave-covid-cases-may-suffer-lasting-harm-to-sense-of-smell</a>
GIST	<p>Nearly half of those who became ill with Covid in the first wave of infections may have long-term and even permanent changes to their sense of smell, according to preliminary research from Sweden.</p> <p>A sudden loss of smell, or an impaired or distorted perception of odours, emerged as an unusual symptom of Covid early on in the pandemic. While many people swiftly recovered, others found that their sense of smell never quite returned to normal.</p> <p>To find out how common the impairments might be, scientists at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm ran comprehensive tests on 100 individuals who caught Covid in the first wave of infections that swept through Sweden in spring 2020.</p> <p>Their early findings show that 18 months after recovering from Covid, very few people – only 4% – had lost their sense of smell entirely, but a third had a reduced ability to detect odours, and nearly half complained of <a href="#">parosmia</a>, where the sense of smell is distorted. Most of those with a reduced sense of smell were unaware of it before they joined the study.</p> <p>The scientists then ran the same tests on a control group of people who tested negative for Covid antibodies, indicating that they had managed to avoid the virus. About a fifth were found to have similar deficiencies in their sense of smell, implying that smell disorders were common in the general population before Covid struck.</p>

Writing in a [preprint](#) that has not yet been peer reviewed, the scientists conclude that 65% of those who recovered from Covid displayed either a loss of smell, a reduced sense of smell, or distortions to the sense 18 months after the infection, compared with 20% of those who had not caught the virus. “Given the amount of time since [the] initial insult to the olfactory system, it is likely that these olfactory problems are permanent,” they wrote.

The volunteers recruited for the study were healthcare workers who were regularly tested for Covid from the start of the epidemic in Sweden. Because the study focused on people who caught Covid in the first wave, none of the volunteers had been vaccinated at the time. For the same reason, their infections were caused by older versions of the virus, not the Omicron variant that is now spreading rapidly around the world.

Analysis by the UK Health Security Agency suggests that a loss of smell or taste is [less than half as common](#) with Omicron than the Delta variant, but Dr Johan Lundström, who led the research at the Karolinska Institute, said there was no reliable data demonstrating that Omicron was less dangerous to the olfactory system.

A minor loss of smell, or noticing that certain odours smell weird, may not be life changing for many, but Lundström said a severe loss of smell could lead to depression and to people changing their diets, often for the worse, causing them to put on weight.

“When you cannot smell, all you can sense is the five basic taste qualities, tactile sensations and spices,” he said. “Unconsciously, people start to add more sugar and fat, or have an increased urge for fried food for the texture, all to get some enjoyment out of eating.”

Lundström said the greatest surprise of the study was that nearly half of people who had recovered from Covid reported a distorted sense of smell so long after the infection. “Many of these individuals can get help by doing olfactory training,” he added. “They might not regain 100% of past performance, but most of them will, [with training](#), get back to a point where their reduced sense of smell will not affect their lives.”

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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Toxic PCBs festered at Monroe school 8yrs</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/times-watchdog/toxic-pcb-festered-at-a-monroe-washington-school-as-sky-valley-students-teachers-grew-sicker/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/times-watchdog/toxic-pcb-festered-at-a-monroe-washington-school-as-sky-valley-students-teachers-grew-sicker/</a>
GIST	<p>MONROE — For Michelle Leahy, it started with headaches, inflamed rashes on her arms and legs, and blisters in her mouth.</p> <p>Some students and staff at Sky Valley Education Center, an alternative public school in Monroe, also had strange symptoms: cognitive problems, skin cysts, girls suddenly hitting puberty as young as age 6.</p> <p>Leahy, like others, eventually became too sick to return to campus. She developed uterine cancer as her other symptoms escalated.</p> <p>“Who would ever think that the job that you love was making you sick?” Leahy, 62, said.</p> <p>She didn’t know it then, about seven years ago, but her classroom contained some of the highest levels of toxic chemicals found at Sky Valley. Inspections and environmental testing across campus found an amalgam of harmful environmental conditions, including carbon dioxide, poor air ventilation and polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, a banned, man-made chemical that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has linked to some cancers and other illnesses.</p> <p>School administrators, however, knew.</p>

Health reports flagged problems on campus as early as 2014, a year before Leahy's health began to fail. But even as parents complained, again and again, about suspected environmental hazards there, school officials offered reassurances that cleanup efforts at Sky Valley were successful.

Records obtained by The Seattle Times in a public disclosure request show that Monroe School District officials [responded slowly](#) — at times asserting, even in [official reports to the federal EPA](#), they had cleared the campus of toxic material although it still lingered in buildings.

To this day, federal officials still are pressing Monroe schools to clear the campus of PCB-laden material and address other environmental hazards. And to this day, Sky Valley remains open.

Ultimately more than 200 teachers, parents and students would claim that exposure at Sky Valley made them severely sick with illnesses that have been linked to PCB exposure. The saga at Sky Valley unfolded [in a remarkable lawsuit against the manufacturers of PCBs](#), producing some of the largest jury awards for individuals exposed to the chemical.

The litigation revealed a startling gap in Washington state law — readily acknowledged by government officials in court documents — that allows environmental hazards to fester in schools, and potentially has implications for older schools across the state.

State law requires health districts to inspect schools for environmental hazards and propose actions — but [they are not required to enforce](#) their findings. And although school districts are required to broadly maintain a healthy environment, they don't have to act on all health recommendations.

And if inspections find certain toxic chemicals, including PCBs, state law doesn't require administrators to notify parents, students or staff of the results.

As a result of those gaps, the Monroe School District and the Snohomish Health District haven't faced any penalties from regulators relating to Sky Valley.

It's unclear if Sky Valley is an outlier or a harbinger of more cases among the roughly 9,000 school buildings in Washington because the state has not done a comprehensive survey of their environmental health.

But seven years ago [state environment officials said they were "especially concerned"](#) about schools' potential to have PCBs, which were banned by the EPA in 1979 but still remain in some structures built before then.

State Rep. Gerry Pollet, D-Seattle, said Washington's state law is notoriously weak when it comes to environmental health in schools, which he learned last year when he helped pass a law [requiring testing for lead in school drinking water](#).

School districts have resisted mandatory testing and cleanup laws because they do not want to be held financially responsible for expensive remediation when it is demanded, Pollet said.

"If you have a contaminated gas station, we clean it up for the health of the community," Pollet said. "But if you have the same contamination inside the school building, we act like it's exempt from our standards of toxic exposure and cleanup. And that is a really sad and serious failing of state policy."

The Monroe School District did not respond to questions about conditions at Sky Valley and declined to make officials available for interviews, including its superintendent. School board members did not respond to requests for comment. Instead, the district directed The Seattle Times to a lawyer and a [456-page consultant's report](#) that defends the district's handling of Sky Valley.

The report defends the district's communication with parents and teachers about the unfolding problem and says officials addressed PCBs appropriately. It notes that, although Washington mandates schools maintain safe conditions, "none of these requirements are specific to PCBs in building materials."



Leahy eventually transferred out of Sky Valley to another school, as did several other teachers, before retiring to Spokane, where she now lives.

One memory is particularly haunting for her: setting up an inflatable planetarium once a week to teach immersive astronomy lessons to some of the brightest STEM students, about 20 at a time.

But with little air circulation inside, Leahy now believes her immersive lessons became an unwitting chamber for harmful chemicals in the air and carpet. Many of her students became ill around this time.

“I had no idea,” she said, dissolving into tears. “I was poisoning my students.”

#### **“And it is safe”**

Monroe, a small city nestled near the Cascade foothills northeast of Seattle, is home to one of the largest public parental co-op programs in the state: Sky Valley Education Center. Launched in 1998, it offers K-12 students individual learning plans that include hands-on environmental science courses and self-directed Montessori instruction.

The popular, 700-student program once occupied a vacant warehouse. In 2011, it moved to an aging campus when the district consolidated middle schools, giving the program bigger classrooms, a gymnasium and outdoor space.

The toxicants that would creep into classrooms and hallways predated Sky Valley’s move. The lights and caulking were infused with PCBs, an effective preservative popular in school construction before research revealed its toxicity in the 1970s.

Within three years of moving, decades-old fluorescent lights at Sky Valley started to fail, district records show. The fixtures smoked, caught fire and dripped sticky yellow oil.

Teachers began raising concerns. One teacher pieced together staff and student symptoms and raised suspicions about PCBs. Sky Valley Principal Karen Rosencrans emailed staff in April 2014, the first of many reassurances that the district had the problem under control.

“Our building is quirky and old and sometimes a challenge. But it is ours. And it is safe,” Rosencrans wrote, assuring parents that the district would remove and replace faulty lights. Rosencrans directed questions to the school district, which declined to comment on the school contamination.

Two weeks later, a school district consultant carried out the first of at least half a dozen inspections to come over the next seven years. It found elevated concentrations of PCBs in a science prep area near classrooms.

While the EPA does not set standards for indoor PCB concentrations, it offers “recommended” thresholds in schools that increase by age, aimed at reducing potential for harm. “They should not be interpreted nor applied as ‘bright line’ or ‘not-to-exceed’ criteria, but may be used to guide thoughtful evaluation of indoor air quality in schools,” the agency says of its recommended limits. In Sky Valley, the PCB levels exceeded the threshold for infants and toddlers.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has linked PCB exposure to impaired memory and learning ability, skin conditions, liver problems and other illnesses. Animal studies connect the chemical to thyroid and hormone problems, neurological damage and some cancers, depending on the number, length and dose of the exposures.

It’s difficult to tell exactly what levels of PCB exposures pose immediate harms, but growing research on the toxicity of the chemical has shown stronger ties to illnesses, said Keri Hornbuckle, director of the University of Iowa’s Superfund Research Program, an academic leader in studying airborne PCBs. “It only gets worse year after year.”

Some states enforce limits on indoor PCB concentrations, including Vermont and Massachusetts. Washington does not.

Later that year, the school district's consultant, Seattle-based EHSI, returned to Sky Valley, this time looking for other hazards. It said complaints of headaches, sinus issues and sneezing by teachers and students were likely due to ventilation problems, which led to a buildup of pollutants. The inspection wasn't focused on PCBs, but found high carbon dioxide levels and some mold on campus, and the consultant recommended improving ventilation and removing carpets that can absorb toxics.

Over the course of a year, the school district removed 67 light fixtures suspected to contain PCBs, cleaned more than 100 other lights and removed some carpets from classrooms, district reports said. It later estimated it spent at least \$1.6 million cleaning up Sky Valley, including on testing, new lights and custodial services.

Rosencrans and Monroe schools' operations director, John Mannix, sent a letter to teachers and parents in late 2015 assuring them that all areas were cleaned and treated according to EPA guidelines. Mannix, who now works at Mukilteo schools, did not respond to an interview request.

But that wasn't the opinion of the Snohomish Health District, which raised red flags just two weeks later.

"Our concern is that PCB ballasts might have been missed when this issue was addressed last year," wrote Snohomish health inspector Amanda Zych, according to records obtained by The Times. Among her observations: One classroom carpet suspected to have absorbed PCB oil was duct-taped down instead of taken out.

The district removed the duct-taped carpet and commissioned more air samples. This time the PCB concentrations were higher than earlier tests, district records show.

Parents flooded the Snohomish Health District with dozens of complaints, records show. Kids reported headaches, breathing problems and thyroid and hormonal problems. Parents, students and teachers say they developed cysts and mouth sores; their skin cracked, peeled and changed pigment.

As the health crisis at Sky Valley was playing out, the EPA's regional office found "several cities in Washington that we think would be a good place to look for PCBs in school lighting ballasts," including Monroe, an official wrote in an email relating to a planned program to proactively examine schools for PCBs.

It's likely the chemical is seeping into old campuses across the country without public knowledge, Hornbuckle said. "It's not whether [PCBs] are there or whether they are toxic. We know they're there and we know they're harmful. The question is what do we do to address it."

But without a requirement to test for PCBs in schools — and no requirement to disclose results if tests are performed — there's no way to know how many campuses might have harmful PCBs in the air.

### **"The smoking gun"**

By 2016, two years into the unfolding crisis at Sky Valley, administrators were giving regular updates to families reassuring them that the campus was safe.

Behind the scenes, emails show apparent dysfunction among school, health and environmental officials about how to tackle the problem. The Snohomish Health District looped in the state health and ecology departments, eventually triggering direct EPA involvement.

That February, an official from the state health department told other agencies that she didn't think further air sampling at Sky Valley was necessary, records show. She suggested "a thorough wipe down of hard surfaces with warm soapy water and a thorough vacuum ..."

A state toxicologist forwarded the email to an EPA official in charge of PCB remediation in the Pacific Northwest, writing, “Have you been looped into this? I’m not sure soapy water is the answer.”

It is not, according to EPA rules, which outline specific solvents needed to clean PCBs. The agency also recommends removing all PCB-containing fixtures, but doesn’t require it.

The cost of removing PCB-containing light fixtures from Washington’s public schools is unclear, because the state doesn’t know the extent of the problem, a 2015 Department of Ecology report says. In New York City, officials estimated a decade ago that it would cost about \$708 million to clear PCB-laden lights from 772 schools built before 1979.

After the interagency email exchange, the EPA’s regional office stepped in to direct Sky Valley’s cleanup effort. “We’re anxious to understand the state of PCBs in the school,” Michelle Mullin, who oversees the EPA’s regional PCB program, wrote in late February 2016.

The EPA soon inspected the school, finding PCBs in several light fixtures, federal environmental records show.

On April 21, 2016, the EPA talked with Monroe School District officials about its findings, recommending additional cleanup steps, records show.

Just hours later, as day faded into evening, nearly 100 parents filed into rows of folding chairs that lined the gymnasium at Frank Wagner Elementary School, a newer campus down the street from Sky Valley.

Speaking to the crowd, school officials [emphasized that PCB levels weren’t high enough](#) to exceed the EPA’s guidelines, [according to The Monroe Monitor](#). Rosencrans, the Sky Valley principal, noted that some teachers had gotten so sick that they couldn’t return to campus, but others were in good health.

Deep cleaning was underway to address the campus’s environmental problems, school officials told the parents.

But parents — who confronted officials for the next 3½ hours — feared that regulatory standards weren’t enough to keep children safe.

“I just want to assert the fact that there might not be the science behind combining slightly elevated PCB levels, slightly elevated asbestos levels, slightly elevated radon levels, but when you combine all of those, we are the smoking gun,” said Shelby Keyser, whose children experienced some symptoms. “My kids are the smoking gun.”

She turned to other parents and asked them to raise a hand if their children, too, were a “smoking gun” example, the Monroe Monitor reported. The majority of the parents in the room raised their hands.

### **Still not cleaned**

Six weeks after the tense town hall, the EPA found that PCB levels rose after cleanup, reaching the highest concentrations yet, according to an agency memo. These levels put anyone up to age 19 at risk, based on recommended thresholds.

Parents grew more desperate. Their complaints were not prompting aggressive action, so they turned to social media, forming a “[Healthy Sky Valley Advocacy Group](#)” on Facebook, with daily or weekly posts encouraging each other to report illnesses and sharing articles about PCB exposure.

A [Change.org petition](#) called for the school district to relocate Sky Valley students, signed by 568 people and listing names of friends and family who had fallen ill at Sky Valley.

Some parents reluctantly pulled their children from the program. Teachers quit or sought reassignments or filed workers' compensation claims, although the district would not say how many staffers left Sky Valley during this time frame.

"We really tried everything," one mother told The Seattle Times. She withdrew her children from the school after they experienced severe health complications, including cognitive problems and early puberty. She requested anonymity for her children's privacy. "We tried to get the school district to listen. We tried to get the health district to listen. We did all of this stuff and still nobody would listen."

By fall 2017, the EPA [delivered a clean bill of health](#) to Sky Valley after district officials certified in writing that all PCB-containing light fixtures had been removed, and that a litany of problems had been resolved, completing a multipoint plan the district penned at the EPA's request.

But that wasn't the case.

Contrary to what Monroe School District reported to the EPA — and to parents — federal inspectors in October 2019 found PCBs in "multiple" light fixtures and in an air filter, discovered classroom carpet that had been previously flagged hadn't been fully removed, and raised concerns about PCB-laden caulk in the walls, [EPA documents show](#).

They raised the same problems a year later.

"We are very concerned that PCB contaminated fixtures continue to be found, six years into the process of inspecting and taking inventory, cleaning and removing and disposing of light fixtures," the [EPA wrote in November 2020](#). "The EPA recommends [Sky Valley] address these concerns with more urgency than has yet been demonstrated."

The EPA can penalize the district and school, the letter reads. That would be a rare step for the agency, and Bill Dunbar, a regional EPA spokesperson, would not comment on whether it plans to fine the district.

Last year, Monroe School officials again committed to addressing lingering problems, submitting a plan to the EPA. That plan still "did not fully meet our expectations," so the EPA offered guidance, Dunbar said.

Removing PCB-laden light fixtures is a "no-brainer," said Hornbuckle, the director of Iowa's Superfund Research Program. While it wouldn't completely clear the campus of PCBs, it would likely mitigate one of the highest exposure risks.

"Removing those PCB ballasts is something the state should be doing," she said, adding that replacing outdated fixtures with energy-efficient lights saved other schools money.

For some Sky Valley families, the consequences of the delayed action were devastating.

#### **"This stuff is everywhere"**

In a King County courtroom last summer, Sky Valley teachers described their deteriorating health to a jury. Experts testified about the scientific links between PCBs and brain damage.

Convinced of the connection, a [jury awarded three teachers](#), including Leahy, \$185 million for exposure to PCBs at Sky Valley. Four months later, eight parents, teachers and students won a collective [\\$62 million jury award against Monsanto](#), the chemical manufacturer of PCBs.

The litigation has resulted in one of the largest awards nationwide for individual PCB exposures. The Sky Valley verdicts include punitive damages allowed under Missouri law, where Monsanto was headquartered.

In all, more than 200 parents and teachers have sued, claiming brain damage from exposure to PCBs. At least 17 other lawsuits are awaiting trial.

The complaints catalog many illnesses, but the lawsuits focus on linking cognitive problems to PCB exposure. It's difficult to link illnesses to specific chemical exposures without more scientific research into the effects of PCBs.

Bayer Pharmaceuticals, which in 2018 acquired chemical giant Monsanto, denied the allegations both in the lawsuit and in a statement. The company plans to appeal the jury verdicts.

Many parents, teachers and students with pending lawsuits declined to speak to The Seattle Times.

Leahy, now retired, said she doesn't expect to collect her share of the \$185 million jury award. "But it was never about the money. It was the only way to get the public to listen."

The PCB exposure impaired Leahy's memory and brain function. She couldn't stand in a Sky Valley classroom without having headaches, dizziness, breathing problems, she said.

Others testified in court that their children developed depression and suicidal tendencies.

Cheryl Tye Pritchett, a mother who joined her children on campus multiple times a week until late 2016, testified in court that she developed a persistent cough, stomachaches and eventually foggy and memory issues.

"I'm afraid to find out how severely damaged I am," Tye Pritchett told a jury. Her children also got sick, she said.

Leahy's attorney, Rick Friedman, whose firm represents all the Sky Valley plaintiffs, said the lawsuits point to a larger problem, possibly unfolding in schools across the state and nation.

"It's kind of like lead paint in schools from a decade ago," Friedman said. "How long until we realize that this stuff is everywhere?"

Pollet, the state lawmaker, said that after learning about the Sky Valley saga from The Times, he intends to raise PCB concerns with fellow lawmakers this legislative session.

But he expects school districts to argue, as with lead testing, that remediation of PCBs would be financially crippling.

In 2020, Washington became the first state to successfully sue Monsanto over PCBs, focused on the chemical in waterways. The chemical giant settled for \$95 million, nearly \$60 million of which went to the state's general fund, where the Legislature can direct it to remediation of waterways — or other exposure points, including schools.

#### **"Not enforceable by law"**

The Sky Valley litigation originally took aim at the Monroe School District and Snohomish Health District, accusing the agencies of negligence for the slowly unfolding crisis at Sky Valley.

But King County Superior Court Judge Theresa Doyle dismissed the health district from the lawsuit, after the district argued that loosely written state laws do not require enforcement or action when health inspectors find hazards at schools.

Heather Thomas, a spokesperson for the Snohomish Health District, said in an email that "a general duty by a public agency to inspect schools is just that — a duty to the general public only, and it does not result in a specific duty to enforce in this instance."

Monroe School District also pointed to an absence in state and federal law requiring the removal of PCB-laden material. It argued in court documents that it complied with EPA guidelines, and PCB light removal

	<p>can take “5-10 years.” State and federal environmental agencies recommend removing lights before they leak, but these “recommendations are not enforceable by law,” reads the district’s report defending its actions at Sky Valley.</p> <p>The school district, in declining interview requests, cited a sealed settlement proposal with Sky Valley teachers, parents and students that has not yet been finalized.</p> <p>The district told The Times in July — after the first jury award — that the school is cleared of PCB material.</p> <p>But an EPA spokesperson said the agency is waiting on Monroe School District to submit a cleanup plan before it can make a “formal decision” — which could include another inspection, giving the school an all-clear, or issuing fines.</p> <p>Meanwhile at the state level, environmental officials, who flagged PCBs in schools as a research priority as early as 2015, are just now building a database of potential PCB hot spots, delayed by a legislative appropriation.</p> <p>The department only started surveying school districts last summer, beginning in Eastern Washington. The results of the survey should help the state know whether Sky Valley is an outlier, or a bellwether.</p> <p>“How many kids are sitting in classrooms exposed to PCBs and they don’t even know it,” Leahy said. “How could they know? It doesn’t hit you immediately. It’s like a slow death. You just get sicker, and sicker and sicker until it’s too late.”</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>01/23 Average gas price rises to \$3.40/gal.</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/business-san-francisco-camarillo-a818fc528b3dcc1b2050c70291245aa6">https://apnews.com/article/business-san-francisco-camarillo-a818fc528b3dcc1b2050c70291245aa6</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>CAMARILLO, Calif. (AP) — The average U.S. price of regular-grade gasoline is up a penny over the past two weeks, to \$3.40 per gallon.</p> <p>Industry analyst Trilby Lundberg of the Lundberg Survey said Sunday that prices at the pump could continue to rise because crude oil costs have increased.</p> <p>The average gas price is 95 cents higher than it was one year ago.</p> <p>Nationwide, the highest average price for regular-grade gas is in the San Francisco Bay Area, at \$4.74 per gallon. The lowest average is in Houston, at \$2.86 per gallon.</p> <p>According to the survey, the average price of diesel is \$3.70 a gallon, up 6 cents.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>01/23 Vaccine passport protests in Europe</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-europe-helsinki-2336e6f56442de7ab676a7618df22342">https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-europe-helsinki-2336e6f56442de7ab676a7618df22342</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>HELSINKI (AP) — Thousands of people gathered in European capitals Saturday to protest vaccine passports and other requirements governments have imposed in hopes of ending the coronavirus pandemic.</p> <p>Demonstrations took place in Athens, Helsinki, London, Paris and Stockholm.</p> <p>Marches in Paris drew hundreds of demonstrators protesting the introduction from Monday of a new COVID-19 pass. It will severely restrict the lives of those who refuse to get vaccinated by banning them</p>



from domestic flights, sports events, bars, cinemas and other leisure venues. French media reported that demonstrators also marched by the hundreds in other cities.

In Sweden, where vaccine certificates are required to attend indoor events with more than 50 people, some 3,000 demonstrators marched through central Stockholm and assembled in a main square for a protest organized by the Frihetsrörelsen - or Freedom Movement.

Swedish media reported that representatives from the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement attended the action with a banner. Police closely monitor the group, which has been associated with violent behavior at demonstrations.

Swedish security police had warned that right-wing extremists might take part in Saturday's protest. No major incidents or clashes were reported by late afternoon.

A similar demonstration with some 1,000 participants was held also in Goteborg, Sweden's second-largest city.

The Finnish government authorized local and regional authorities just before Christmas to introduce "extensive and full measures" in response to rising virus cases involving the omicron variant.

The restrictions included limiting or prohibiting events, moving university classes online, limiting restaurant service and closing venues where people have a higher risk of exposure. Restaurants and events are allowed to require vaccine passports.

Police said some 4,000 people marched Saturday through the streets of central Helsinki to protest. A group called World Wide Demonstration organized the demonstration. No unrest or violence was reported to police.

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HEADLINE	01/23 After omicron wave, what's next?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/21/health/after-omicron-next-pandemic-steps/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/21/health/after-omicron-next-pandemic-steps/index.html</a>
GIST	<p>(CNN)Picture a not-too-distant future when you can book that summer trip to Italy or you don't have to remember to take off your mask for graduation photos. After the past 25 months, forgetting the pandemic for even a little while may sound like a fantasy -- after all, the coronavirus has gotten our hopes up before.</p> <p>But infectious disease experts say there just may be an end in sight. Maybe.</p> <p>Well, let's say it's not outside the realm of possibility for 2022.</p> <p>"I think if we do it right, we're going to have a 2022 in which Covid doesn't dominate our lives so much," said Dr. Tom Frieden, who was director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention under President Obama and is now the CEO and president of Resolve to Save Lives.</p> <p>What the next part of the pandemic looks like and when it will get there are what Dr. Yvonne Maldonado, an epidemiologist and infectious disease specialist at Stanford Medicine, and experts at federal agencies, academic colleagues and local public health leaders spent the holidays trying to figure out.</p> <p>There was a general consensus among the experts about what happens next: "We really don't know exactly," Maldonado said.</p> <p>There are disease models and lessons from pandemics past, but the way the highly infectious Omicron variant popped up meant the scientists' proverbial crystal ball got a little hazy.</p> <p>"None of us really anticipated Omicron," Maldonado said. "Well, there were hints, but we did not expect it to happen exactly the way it did."</p>

Omicron has done a lot. More than a quarter of the Covid-19 pandemic's total cases in the United States have been reported in the past month, during the Omicron surge, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

As of Thursday, cases dropped at least 10% compared with last week in 14 states, but 26 states saw cases rise at least 10%, according to Johns Hopkins data.

The wave seems to have peaked in some areas where the Omicron variant first hit in the US, like Boston and New York. But it's still raging out of control in other parts of the country.

In Georgia, for instance, medical leaders in metro Atlanta said hospitals remain overwhelmed. With so many staff out sick, the National Guard now fills in the health care gaps in states like Minnesota. Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards said the "tremendous" amount of Covid-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths has resulted in "as much as we've ever had in the state of Louisiana."

Infectious disease experts, however, see hope in what has happened in South Africa.

"South Africa's kind of our canary in the coal mine because they were able to pick up the Omicron variant first," Maldonado said.

South African scientists first spotted the variant in November. Cases there peaked and fell off quickly. They did the same in the UK. And that's what experts think will happen everywhere.

"I anticipate in the short run -- being the next six weeks, four to six weeks -- that it's still going to be pretty rough," said Dr. John Swartzberg, an expert in infectious diseases and vaccinology and clinical professor emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley's School of Public Health. "It will be about the middle of February before we start to really see that things are getting better."

### **Don't underestimate Omicron -- especially if you're unvaccinated**

If this spike flames out quickly, many experts think, there could be a "quiet period."

Swartzberg believes March through spring or into summer will be like last year, with a continued decline in the number of cases. "There will be a sense of optimism, and then we will be able to do more things in our lives," Swartzberg said. "I think May or June is going to really look up for us. I'm quite optimistic."

Part of his optimism stems from the fact that there will be a much larger immune population, between the increasing number of people who are vaccinated and boosted, and those who've caught Covid-19 during the Omicron surge.

"Generally speaking, the level of immunity in our population is going to be much higher than it was going into the Omicron pandemic, and that's going to help us not only with Omicron and Delta, if they're still circulating, but it will also help us with any new variants," Swartzberg said. "To what degree will depend on the availability of medicines to intervene."

That's because the coronavirus will probably never go away completely.

"I fully anticipate another version of the virus to come back," Maldonado said. "Those are the scenarios that really bring uncertainty to what comes next."

### **The next variant**

The next variant could be equally or even more transmissible than Omicron. It could give people more severe symptoms -- or no symptoms at all.

"It's not at all clear what comes next," said Dr. George Rutherford, an epidemiologist at the University of California, San Francisco. He said the virus could mutate gradually, like what happened with the Alpha

and Beta variants. Or it could make a really large jump, like with Delta and Omicron. "What's next? It's a crapshoot."

The H1N1 flu virus, for example, was a novel virus when it started one of the worst pandemics in history in 1918 -- it infected one-third of the world's population and killed 50 million of them.

That pandemic eventually ended, but the virus is still with us today.

"That was the great-great-grandparent of all the H1N1 viruses we see every year," Maldonado said.

"They've had many mutations since then, but it is from the same strain. So it's possible that this virus will do a similar thing."

The US still loses an average of about 35,000 people a year with the flu, according to the CDC. "And we go on with our lives," Swartzberg said. "I don't think it will ever go back to what it was, exactly."

Maldonado says "that's the best-case scenario."

With this flu-like scenario, the world needs to focus on protecting those vulnerable to severe disease, on making sure they get vaccinated and have access to monoclonal antibodies and antivirals, Maldonado said. Vaccine companies would need to make variant-specific vaccines so people can get a Covid-19 shot every year. The country also has to make testing better.

"The oral drugs and the monoclonals are no good unless you know you're Covid-positive," Swartzberg said.

The in-between scenarios would be if there aren't enough antivirals or monoclonals to treat the people who get sick, or if vaccine manufacturers can't make variant-specific vaccines fast enough.

The worst-case scenario is if a variant escapes the protection of vaccines and treatments.

"I think that's less likely to happen," Maldonado said.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said he hopes that scenario doesn't come to pass. "I can't give you a statistic what the chance of that happen, but we have to be prepared for it.

"So we hope for the best and prepare for the worst."

### **'Choose Your Own Adventure' out of the pandemic**

The US already has the tools to limit new variants and end the pandemic quickly, Dr. Panagis Galiatsatos says.

"I don't think we need any more scientific breakthroughs, we know how to stop severe Covid: vaccines," said Galiatsatos, an assistant professor of medicine and expert in pulmonary and critical care medicine at Johns Hopkins Medicine.

Face masks and testing also help.

Galiatsatos does hundreds of talks each year with community groups to encourage more people to get vaccinated. He thinks scientist will have to continue this outreach.

"We have the weapons to transform Covid into nothing but a bad cold," Galiatsatos said. "We have the science. All people will need is access to the interventions, and we need to regain trust."

	<p>Only about a quarter of the US population is fully vaccinated and boosted, according to the CDC. The more people who are unvaccinated, the more end up in the hospital. The more cases, the more opportunity for dangerous new variants.</p> <p>"That's why it's like a 'Choose Your Own Adventure,' " Galiatsatos said. "And I am choosing the kind that puts us in a better frame of mind that we reach people and get more people vaccinated and can end this pandemic and learn to adapt to this."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Brussels: Covid protest turns violent</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/brussels-police-fire-water-cannon-tear-gas-during-covid-curbs-protest-2022-01-23/">https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/brussels-police-fire-water-cannon-tear-gas-during-covid-curbs-protest-2022-01-23/</a>
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS, Jan 23 (Reuters) - Police in Brussels fired water cannon and tear gas to disperse protesters near the European Commission's headquarters on Sunday, after a protest involving some 50,000 people opposing COVID-19 restrictions turned violent.</p> <p>Although Belgium announced a slight easing of coronavirus restrictions on Friday, despite record infections, the government also said people must have booster shots after five months to maintain the COVID-19 passes which allow them to access bars or cinemas. <a href="#">read more</a></p> <p>The passes, which are mandatory for anyone wishing to enter a restaurant, museum or many other public space, have sparked fierce opposition among some Belgians.</p> <p>In scenes reminiscent of similar clashes last November, when around 35,000 protesters took part in demonstrations that started peacefully but later turned violent, some streets in the Belgian capital were soon filled with acrid tear gas.</p> <p>The building housing the European diplomatic service and a sandwich shop were broken into, a Reuters witness said.</p> <p>Some protesters let off fireworks as police advanced in force into a nearby park where large groups of demonstrators had gathered, the water cannon surrounded by officers wearing body armour, helmets and carrying riot shields.</p> <p>One demonstrator, standing on a stage, told the others to put up their hands, saying the protesters would not give up.</p> <p>"I'm angry about the blackmail that the government is doing, mostly for the young people but for everybody, but mostly for the young people, they are really blackmailing that everybody has to go for the vaccine", Caroline van Landuyt, who said she had been vaccinated against COVID-19 herself, said.</p> <p>Belgium is in the midst of a fifth wave of COVID-19 infections, with the peak not expected for at least a couple of weeks. Some 89% of adults in Belgium are fully vaccinated and 67% have now also received a booster shot.</p> <p>"I was very angry that my children had to do have the vaccine. They want to travel, they want to do sports competitions, and they can't do it without a vaccine, but they did not want to, it's just blackmail," she added.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 UK warns Russia of 'severe sanctions'</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-faces-severe-sanctions-if-it-installs-puppet-regime-ukraine-uk-minister-2022-01-23/">https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-faces-severe-sanctions-if-it-installs-puppet-regime-ukraine-uk-minister-2022-01-23/</a>

LONDON/KIYV, Jan 23 (Reuters) - Russia will face severe economic sanctions if it installs a puppet regime in Ukraine, a senior UK minister said on Sunday after Britain accused the Kremlin of seeking to install a pro-Russian leader there.

Britain made the accusation late on Saturday, also saying Russian intelligence officers had been in contact with a number of former Ukrainian politicians as part of plans for an invasion.

The Russian Foreign Ministry dismissed the comments as "disinformation", accusing Britain and NATO of "escalating tensions" over Ukraine. The British claims came after the top U.S. and Russian diplomats failed on Friday to make a major breakthrough in talks to resolve the crisis over Ukraine, although they agreed to keep talking.

Mykhailo Podolyak, a Ukrainian adviser to the presidential office, said the allegations should be taken seriously.

"There'll be very serious consequences if Russia takes this move to try and invade but also install a puppet regime," British Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab told Sky News.

The British accusations, first made in a statement by the foreign ministry, come at a time of high tensions with the West over Russia's massing of troops near the border with Ukraine.

Moscow has insisted it has no plans to invade.

The foreign ministry said it had information the Russian government was considering former Ukrainian lawmaker Yevhen Murayev as a potential candidate to head a pro-Russian leadership.

Murayev himself poured cold water on the notion that Russia wants to install him as Ukraine's leader, in comments to British newspapers and in an interview with Reuters.

"This morning I already read in all the news publications this conspiracy theory: absolutely unproven, absolutely unfounded," Murayev told Reuters in a video call, adding he was considering legal action.

He denied having any contact with Russian intelligence officers and dismissed the idea that he could be in league with the Kremlin as "stupid", given he was placed under Russian sanctions in 2018.

Although he says he wants Ukraine to be independent from Russia as well as the West, Murayev, 45, has promoted some views that align with the Kremlin's narratives on Ukraine.

Also noting he was under sanctions, the Russian Embassy in London mocked the "obvious deterioration" of British expertise on the region.

The British foreign ministry declined to provide evidence to back its accusations. A ministry source said it was not usual practice to share intelligence, and the details had only been declassified after careful consideration to deter Russian aggression.

In a message to Reuters, Ukrainian adviser Podolyak acknowledged there was doubt among Ukrainians as to whether Murayev was "too ridiculous a figure" to be the Kremlin's pick to lead Ukraine. But he added that Russia had propped up previously minor figures in leadership positions in annexed Crimea and separatist-held Donbass.

Therefore "one should take this information as seriously as possible", he said.

According to a poll by the Razumkov's Centre think tank conducted in December 2021, Murayev was ranked seventh among candidates for the 2024 presidential election, with 6.3% support.

'DEEPLY CONCERNING'

	<p>Russia has made security demands on the United States including a halt to NATO's eastward expansion and a pledge that Ukraine will never be allowed to join the Western military alliance.</p> <p>U.S. National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said in a statement: "This kind of plotting is deeply concerning. The Ukrainian people have the sovereign right to determine their own future, and we stand with our democratically-elected partners in Ukraine."</p> <p>Britain, which this week supplied 2,000 missiles and a team of military trainers to Ukraine, also said it had information that Russian intelligence services were maintaining links with numerous former Ukrainian politicians, including senior figures with links to ex-President Viktor Yanukovich.</p> <p>Yanukovich fled to Russia in 2014 after three months of protests against his rule and was sentenced in absentia to 13 years in jail on treason charges in 2019.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Burkina Faso military barracks in mutiny</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/africa-burkina-faso-ouagadougou-roch-marc-christian-kabore-b5f6654b95362410df94852ff7a774d9">https://apnews.com/article/africa-burkina-faso-ouagadougou-roch-marc-christian-kabore-b5f6654b95362410df94852ff7a774d9</a>
GIST	<p>OUAGADOUGOU, Burkina Faso (AP) — Mutinous soldiers seized control of a military base in Burkina Faso's capital Sunday, raising fears of a coup attempt in the West African nation as gunfire rang out for hours amid growing frustration with the government's handling of the Islamic insurgency.</p> <p>The apparent mutiny came one day after the latest public demonstration calling for President Roch Marc Christian Kabore's resignation. On Sunday, security forces used tear gas to disperse crowds seeking to publicly support the mutineers. Crowds also vandalized a building occupied by the president's political party and set it on fire.</p> <p>Defense Minister Aime Barthelemy Simore told state broadcaster RTB that a few barracks had been affected by unrest not only in the capital of Ouagadougou but in other cities too. He denied, however, that the president had been detained by the mutineers, even though Kabore's whereabouts remained unknown.</p> <p>"Well, it's a few barracks. There are not too many," Simore said. "In some of these barracks, the calm has already returned. So that's it for the moment. As I said, we are monitoring the situation."</p> <p>A news headline on the state broadcaster described the gunfire as "acts of discontent by soldiers."</p> <p>"Contrary to some information, no institution of the republic has been targeted," the headline continued.</p> <p>At the Lamizana Sangoule military barracks in the capital, however, angry soldiers shot into the air Sunday, directing their anger over army casualties at the president. About 100 motorcycles later left the base, chanting in support of the mutineers, but were stopped when security forces deployed tear gas.</p> <p>The soldiers put a man on the phone with The Associated Press who said that they were seeking better working conditions for Burkina Faso's military amid the escalating fight against Islamic militants. Among their demands are increased manpower in the battle against extremists and better care for those wounded and the families of the dead. The mutinous soldiers also want the military and intelligence hierarchy replaced, he said.</p> <p>There were signs Sunday that their demands were supported by many in Burkina Faso who are increasingly distressed by the attacks blamed on al-Qaida and Islamic State-linked groups. Thousands have died in recent years from those attacks and around 1.5 million people have been displaced.</p> <p>"We want the military to take power," said Salif Sawadogo as he tried to avoid tear gas on the streets of Ouagadougou. "Our democracy is not stable."</p>

Kabore first took office in 2015, winning the election held after longtime President Blaise Compaore was ousted in a popular uprising.

Still, Kabore has faced growing opposition since his reelection in November 2020 as the country's Islamic extremism crisis has deepened. Last month he fired his prime minister and replaced most of the Cabinet, but critics have continued calling for his resignation.

On Sunday, protesters who supported the army mutiny said they had had enough of Kabore even though the next presidential election isn't until 2025. Demonstrator Aime Birba said the violence under Kabore has been unlike anything Burkina Faso experienced during the nearly three decades Compaore was in power.

"We are currently under another form of dictatorship," he said. "A president who is not able to take security measures to secure his own people is not a president worthy of the name."

Earlier this month, authorities had arrested a group of soldiers accused of participating in a foiled coup plot. It was not immediately known whether there was any connection between those soldiers and the ones who led a mutiny Sunday. Military prosecutors said nine soldiers and two civilians were being held in connection with the plot.

West Africa has seen a spate of military coups in West Africa over the past 18 months, causing the regional bloc known as ECOWAS to suspend two member states simultaneously for the first time since 2012.

In August 2020, a mutiny at a Malian military barracks led to the democratically elected president being detained. He later announced his resignation on national television, and the junta leader there doesn't want new elections for four more years.

In September 2021, Guinea's president also was overthrown by a military junta that remains in power to this day.

Burkina Faso, too has seen its share of coup attempts and military takeovers. In 1987, Compaore came to power by force. And in 2015, soldiers loyal to him attempted to overthrow the transitional government put into place after his ouster. The army was ultimately able to put the transitional authorities back in power, who led again until Kabore won an election and took office.

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HEADLINE	01/23 Race as factor in Covid treatment
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-race-and-ethnicity-racial-injustice-madison-251ffe2672b6c40ca7b8a0a7341959f2">https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-race-and-ethnicity-racial-injustice-madison-251ffe2672b6c40ca7b8a0a7341959f2</a>
GIST	<p>MADISON, Wis. (AP) — Some conservatives are taking aim at policies that allow doctors to consider race as a risk factor when allocating scarce COVID-19 treatments, saying the protocols discriminate against white people.</p> <p>The wave of infections brought on by the omicron variant and a <a href="#">shortage of treatments</a> have focused attention on the policies.</p> <p>Medical experts say the opposition is misleading. Health officials have long said there is a strong case for considering race as one of many risk factors in treatment decisions. And there is no evidence that race alone is being used to decide who gets medicine.</p> <p>The issue came to the forefront last week after Fox News host Tucker Carlson, former President <a href="#">Donald Trump</a> and Republican Sen. <a href="#">Marco Rubio</a> jumped on the policies. In recent days, conservative law firms</p>



have pressured a Missouri-based health care system, Minnesota and Utah to drop their protocols and sued New York state over allocation guidelines or scoring systems that include race as a risk factor.

JP Leider, a senior fellow in the Division of Health Policy and Management at the University of Minnesota who helped develop that state's allocation criteria, noted that prioritization has been going on for some time because there aren't enough treatments to go around.

"You have to pick who comes first," Leider said. "The problem is we have extremely conclusive evidence that (minorities) across the United States are having worse COVID outcomes compared to white folks. ... Sometimes it's acceptable to consider things like race and ethnicity when making decisions about when resources get allocated at a societal level."

Since the pandemic began, health care systems and states have been grappling with how to best distribute treatments. The problem has only grown worse as the omicron variant has packed hospitals with COVID-19 patients.

Considerable evidence suggests that COVID-19 has hit certain racial and ethnic groups harder than whites. Research shows that people of color are at a [higher risk](#) of severe illness, are [more likely](#) to be hospitalized and are [dying from COVID-19](#) at younger ages.

Data also show that minorities have been missing out on treatments. Last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published [an analysis](#) of 41 health care systems that found that Black, Asian and Hispanic patients are less likely than whites to receive outpatient antibody treatment.

Omicron has rendered [two widely available antibody treatments](#) ineffective, leaving only one, which is in short supply.

The Food and Drug Administration has given health care providers guidance on when that treatment, sotrovimab, should be used, including a list of medical conditions that put patients at high risk of severe outcomes from COVID-19. The [FDA's guidance](#) says other factors such as race or ethnicity might also put patients at higher risk.

The [CDC's list](#) of high-risk underlying conditions notes that age is the strongest risk factor for severe disease and lists more than a dozen medical conditions. It also suggests that doctors and nurses "carefully consider potential additional risks of COVID-19 illness for patients who are members of certain racial and ethnic minority groups."

State guidelines generally recommend that doctors give priority for the drugs to those at the highest risk, including cancer patients, transplant recipients and people who have lung disease or are pregnant. Some states, including Wisconsin, have implemented policies that bar race as a factor, but others have allowed it.

St. Louis-based SSM Health, which serves patients in Illinois, Missouri, Oklahoma and Wisconsin, required patients to score 20 points on a risk calculator to qualify for COVID-19 antibody treatment. Non-whites automatically got seven points.

State health officials in Utah adopted a similar risk calculator that grants people two points if they're not white. Minnesota's health department guidelines automatically assigned two points to minorities. Four points was enough to qualify for treatment.

New York state health officials' guidelines authorize antiviral treatments if patients meet five criteria. One is having "a medical condition or other factors that increase their risk for severe illness." One of those factors is being a minority, according to the guidelines.

The protocols have become a talking point for Republicans after The Wall Street Journal ran an op-ed by political commentators John Judis and Ruy Teixeira this month complaining that New York's policy is

unfair, unjustified and possibly illegal. Carlson jumped on Utah's and Minnesota's policies last week, saying "you win if you're not white."

Alvin Tillery, a political scientist at Northwestern University, called the issue a winning political strategy for Trump and Republicans looking to motivate their predominantly white base ahead of midterm elections in November. He said conservatives are twisting the narrative, noting that race is only one of a multitude of factors in every allocation policy.

"It does gin up their people, gives them a chance in elections," Tillery said.

After the Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty, a conservative law firm based in Madison, sent a letter to SSM Health on Friday demanding that it drop race from its risk calculator, SSM responded that it already did so last year as health experts' understanding of COVID-19 evolved.

"While early versions of risk calculators across the nation appropriately included race and gender criteria based on initial outcomes, SSM Health has continued to evaluate and update our protocols weekly to reflect the most up-to-date clinical evidence available," the company said in a statement. "As a result, race and gender criteria are no longer utilized."

America First Legal, a conservative-leaning law firm based in Washington, D.C., filed a federal lawsuit Sunday against New York demanding that the state remove race from its allocation criteria. The same firm warned Minnesota and Utah last week that they should drop race from their preference factors or face lawsuits.

Erin Silk, a spokeswoman for New York state's health department, declined to comment on the lawsuit. She said the state's guidance is based on CDC guidelines and that race is one of many factors that doctors should consider when deciding who gets treatment. She stressed that doctors should consider a patient's total medical history and that no one is refused treatment because of race or any other demographic qualifier.

Minnesota health officials dropped race from the state's criteria a day or two before receiving America Legal First's demands, Leider said. They said in a statement that they're committed to serving all Minnesotans equitably and are constantly reviewing their policies. The statement did not mention the letter from America Legal First. Leider said the state is now picking treatment recipients through a lottery.

Utah dropped race and ethnicity from its risk score calculator on Friday, among other changes, citing new federal guidance and the need to make sure classifications comply with federal law. The state's health department said that instead of using those as factors in eligibility for treatments, it would "work with communities of color to improve access to treatments" in other ways.

Leider finds the criticism of the race-inclusive policies disingenuous.

"It's easy to bring in identity politics and set up choices between really wealthy folks of one type and folks of other types," he said. "It's hard to take seriously those kinds of comparisons. They don't seem very fair to reality."

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HEADLINE	01/23 UAE bans flying recreational drones
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/uae-bans-flying-recreational-drones-fatal-attack-82422803">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/uae-bans-flying-recreational-drones-fatal-attack-82422803</a>
GIST	DUBAI, United Arab Emirates -- The United Arab Emirates has banned the flying of drones in the country for recreation after Yemen's Houthi rebels claimed a fatal drone attack on an oil facility and major airport in the country.

	<p>As of Saturday, drone hobbyists and other operators of light electric sports aircraft face “legal liabilities” if caught flying the objects, the Interior Ministry said, adding it may grant exemptions to businesses seeking to film.</p> <p>A rare drone and missile strike on the capital of Abu Dhabi blew up several fuel tankers and killed three people last week.</p> <p>The Houthis, who hold Yemen's capital and have fought a bloody, yearslong war with a Saudi-led military coalition that includes the UAE, claimed the assault. While the UAE has largely withdrawn troops from the stalemated conflict, the country continues to be a major player and support local militias on the ground.</p> <p>The UAE said the Houthis targeted the country with bomb-laden drones and cruise and ballistic missiles, adding the country had intercepted some of the projectiles. In response to the strike, the Saudi-led coalition has escalated attacks on the rebel-held parts of Yemen in the last week.</p> <p>Government regulations in the UAE already restrict flying drones in residential areas as well as near, around and over airports. Drone users typically must obtain a certificate from the civil aviation authorities.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 Rapid test kits backlogged for delivery</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/US/worker-shortages-flight-delays-contributing-slow-delivery-rapid/story?id=82402734">https://abcnews.go.com/US/worker-shortages-flight-delays-contributing-slow-delivery-rapid/story?id=82402734</a>
GIST	<p>Rebeca Andrade had been waiting days for a shipment of COVID-19 rapid tests to help keep her school open. The superintendent of a school in Salinas, California, Andrade said she wanted to be testing kids once a week to slow the spread of the omicron variant and protect the community.</p> <p>But even as rapid testing to keep schools open was being pushed at the highest levels of government, Andrade was coming up short.</p> <p>That's because 350 miles away, some 17 million tests -- including some earmarked by the California Department of Public Health for schools like Andrade's, plus nursing homes, homeless shelters and childcare centers -- sat backlogged on giant pallets for days.</p> <p>Like so many other vital goods, precious at-home rapid tests have been caught in the supply-chain snare, caused by a combination of workers calling out sick with omicron and bottlenecked warehouses that are already operating over capacity to handle the massive demand for tests.</p> <p>The impacted tests are some of the test kits produced by iHealth, which are manufactured in China and have been purchased by at least 15 states.</p> <p>"The delays that we've experienced during this time, I know that sometimes it's out of our control, but this is something that I would say is really critical and a priority for us to continue to offer in-person learning for each and every one of our students," Andrade told ABC News.</p> <p>As of Thursday, the distribution company that handles the iHealth shipments from China, XChange Logistics, had worked through the millions of backlogged tests, only to face delays on three of iHealth's charter planes carrying roughly 25 million tests, the company told ABC News.</p> <p>At the same time, the distribution company said it's still sending out 20 truckloads of tests per day from its Los Angeles warehouse, which is the biggest distributor of iHealth tests.</p> <p>For iHealth, which received authorization for its at-home rapid tests from the Food and Drug Administration in December and can manufacture up to 200 million tests per month, producing the tests has turned out to be the easy part.</p>

Getting them to customers is the challenge.

"I hope that one day the American people can get the test the same day," said iHealth COO Jack Feng, referring to the timeline of shipment from China and delivery in the U.S.

XChange Logistics said their warehouses were struggling at 200-300% over capacity last week.

And the stress of moving so many goods has been compounded by workers testing positive for COVID-19 -- which usually means that an additional 8-10 workers have to quarantine due to exposure, said Frank Filimaua, the company's general manager.

Over the past month, up to 30% of XChange Logistics' workforce has been out with COVID-19, Filimaua said.

"That certainly is impacting the lack of manpower and the shortage of the ground-handling agents," he said.

Under normal circumstances, without worker shortages and such a high-demand product, it would take 24-48 hours to get the tests from the planes onto trucks and on their way to customers.

But it was instead taking an average of five days, said Filimaua.

He estimated that it would take the company two more weeks to get back up to speed.

The supply chain backlog is the "biggest key factor as to why there's challenges in getting these kits to schools, to medical offices, hospitals, and to consumers," he said.

"Everybody has just been highlighting and showcasing the congestion at the ports and the container congestion," said Filimaua. "Nobody's really focusing on what's happening at the international airports. It's the same effect, but I would even say to a higher degree of challenges and impact to the supply chain and to the consumers."

After ABC News reached out this week to the White House about the millions of backlogged tests, iHealth said the Biden administration had stepped up its efforts to help the company, which has now also contracted with the government to supply 250 million tests to Biden's efforts to give out 1 billion free tests to the public, Feng said.

Agencies like Health and Human Services and the Department of Defense have begun to help iHealth get its tests through customs faster using priority labels, and will help charter flights full of the tests from China beginning in the first week of February, Feng said.

"They are helping us a lot," said Feng.

Feng also said some states have also mobilized resources by sending ground teams to the warehouses to help move tests.

A Biden administration official told ABC News that the White House "continues to actively engage with manufacturers and distributors to help them expedite their timelines and help get tests to the American people."

The official said the government was coordinating chartered aircraft for the 250 million iHealth rapid tests it had contracted for Biden's plan, and was also working on "breaking through bottlenecks" at Los Angeles International Airport, where most shipments from China arrive, by working with the airport and with Customs and Border Protection to get each shipment "trucked out of the airport as soon as it lands."

The official also noted that the Biden administration had increased the monthly supply of overall at-home rapid tests in the U.S. four times over from fall through December.

Experts note that the supply chain issues facing iHealth are not unique to that testing company.

Some of the issues stem from "general supply challenges," said Mara Aspinall, head of the National Testing Action Program at the Rockefeller Foundation, which connects testing companies with state governments.

"But increasingly we're hearing that -- like all other essential businesses -- manufacturers, shipping companies and others have so many people out with COVID that they can't fully take advantage of the technological capacity, and therefore supplies are being slowed," she said.

While iHealth is one of the most prolific producers of rapid tests for the U.S., other companies are also critical to meeting the enormous demand. ABC News reached out to several other large suppliers of rapid tests, including Roche, Siemens, Abbott and Ellume, and those that responded said they were doing everything possible to meet demand, including opening new production lines to scale up production by tens of millions of tests per month.

"There are currently tens of millions of tests in various settings and supply chains," said Abbott spokesperson John Koval. "We build BinaxNOW in the U.S. because it hedges against unpredictable supply chains and is what enables us to produce at massive and reliable scale, which is what we're doing." As a result, Koval said, the company is aiming to be able to produce 100 million tests per month.

With more and more rapid testing products on the market, there's also more competition for distributors. That's been a particular challenge for iHealth, a new company that didn't have the connections of bigger pharmaceutical companies that had been around for years.

"I think it's hard to guarantee a consistent freight supplier for so many of these companies, because there's not a program where when you receive an EUA [emergency use authorization from the FDA], you receive immediate distribution assistance," said Andrew Sweet, managing director of COVID-19 Response and Recovery at the Rockefeller Foundation.

"That's in part why we're at where we're at," said Sweet. "It is really dependent on the individual manufacturer to have those relationships in order to get their product to market as quickly as possible." As a result, said Sweet, the companies that have existing relationships can "hustle."

"They're more successful than others," he said.

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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 Food banks face staffing, supply shortages</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/US/food-banks-nationwide-face-staffing-supply-shortages/story?id=82348796">https://abcnews.go.com/US/food-banks-nationwide-face-staffing-supply-shortages/story?id=82348796</a>
GIST	<p>Local food banks nationwide are struggling to keep up with demand, due to staffing and food shortages as the omicron COVID-19 surge continues to ravage the country.</p> <p>"Food banks across the nation provide hope and help to people every day and we all need to stand shoulder to shoulder and work on the hunger problems in our country," said Brett Meredith, the CEO of the Community Food Bank of Central Alabama.</p> <p>The pandemic has exacerbated the need for assistance, as millions of people continue to face unemployment, food insecurity and poverty, according to the Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey.</p> <p>The survey found that almost 23 million people either "sometimes" or "often" did not have enough to eat, and 200 million people said their household experienced a loss in employment income in the last month.</p>

Central California Food Bank said they were helping serve 280,000 people before the pandemic and that need has increased up to 350,000 people a month.

In Florida, where the non-profit Boca Helping Hands once served 300 people a day at most at their largest location before the pandemic, they now help feed more than 400.

Though the demand for help remains high, [volunteers and staff members are in short supply](#), with many people out sick or quarantining due to COVID-19.

Boca Helping Hands would typically have 40 volunteers to sufficiently operate per day -- but they've been struggling to get as many as 25 volunteers to come out to help.

"We just encourage other people who are able to assist to the step up," said Boca Helping Hand Executive Director Greg Hazle.

In Missouri, the South Missouri Food Bank has seen a dip in volunteer attendance, showing that some volunteer groups that usually arrive with about 12 to 15 people to give a helping hand are arriving with less than 10.

They've had several staff absences as well and with a small staff, "even one absence has an impact," Lisa Church, the chief advancement officer of the organization, told ABC News.

"[We are] trying to get in temporary employees to help cover some warehouse tasks like pulling orders so that more experienced employees can run routes," Church said. "Even this has been a little difficult."

Some locations say they are also seeing food shortages due to supply-chain disruptions that are driving up prices and leading to a growing shortage of goods in some locations.

Whatever gaps in food and supplies aren't filled by donations are taken from the wallets of the food banks that are struggling to stay afloat, organizations say.

"We're not receiving as much [U.S. Department of Agriculture] food as we used to and so we've had to purchase food as a supplement to our donated food, which is a significant expense in our budget," said Meredith.

Some government programs that helped lighten the load on food banks amid the COVID-19 crisis, including the Farmers to Families Food Box initiative, are no longer operating.

"All COVID funding from state and federal levels has been expended and there is no more funding specific to address the ongoing impacts of COVID," said Robin Allen-Maddox, the marketing & communications manager at the Central California Food Bank.

Food banks are calling out for help, as they focus on getting food to those who need it the most.

"In the athletic world, they have the 'next man up' philosophy. When the stars are down, we need somebody else to step up and that's what we need right now in our volunteer community," Hazle said.

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HEADLINE	01/23 Weary nurses treat too many patients
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-hospital-strained-by-omicron-weary-nurses-treat-too-many-patients-11642933804?mod=hp_lead_pos7">https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-hospital-strained-by-omicron-weary-nurses-treat-too-many-patients-11642933804?mod=hp_lead_pos7</a>
GIST	Houston Methodist Hospital, inundated with patients from <a href="#">the pandemic's latest surge</a> , had too few nurses one recent morning to open all its beds.

Six nurses had been recruited away by staffing firms days earlier. Dozens more were out sick with Covid-19. Those still left were working extra hours to help the hospital accommodate a daily crush of new, very sick patients.

“I’m not running the same size hospital today that I did two months ago,” said Roberta Schwartz, head of incident command at the hospital.

In the emergency room, three dozen patients waited for beds, she said, while another 75 seeking to transfer from other hospitals stood by for space.

[The fast-moving Omicron variant](#) is straining U.S. hospitals on a scale not seen before in the two-year-old pandemic. The facilities are confronting [record or near-record levels of patients](#) while staff struggle with burnout and [call in sick in large numbers](#) due to the virus. Even hospitals in regions where the Omicron wave has begun easing say they couldn’t keep up, forcing them to make agonizing decisions about [which desperate patients they can admit](#) and which must wait, risking more severe illness.

“With 1,100 new positive cases in our employees last week, you have no choice,” Ms. Schwartz said early this month while Houston Methodist Hospital was closing about 140 beds a day on average, more than one-tenth of its capacity, largely because of staffing.

Signs [the latest surge may have peaked](#) in some parts of the U.S., including Houston and New York, offer hope to overtaxed hospitals there. But while some hospitals are starting to see admissions slow and sick-outs fall, [Covid-19 cases keep rising elsewhere](#).

Adding to the challenges confronting the hospitals: a tight labor market that has prompted many nurses to leave for more lucrative jobs with staffing agencies.

Meanwhile, the cumulative physical and emotional toll mounts for nurses, doctors and other hospital staff from two years of repeated surges.

“It’s death all around you all the time,” said Nikki Saranathan, a Houston Methodist Hospital nurse. “It drains you.”

The multitower Houston Methodist Hospital is in the south-central part of the city. The hospital, which operated during the influenza pandemic roughly 100 years ago, had built a reputation for its orthopedic and cardiology treatment when the coronavirus pandemic hit.

During the latest surge, Covid-19 patient numbers began to climb before Christmas. Soon, pandemic patients overcrowded the hospital’s 39-bed emergency room, overtook beds for heart disease, stroke and other patients and forced the hospital to halt nonessential procedures.

Houston Methodist Hospital now admits about 200 patients each day, 40% higher than it does typically, Ms. Schwartz said. That amounts to about one-fifth of the hospital’s roughly 1,000 beds. Yet through the surge, she hasn’t been able to use all the beds. As many as 430 of the hospital’s 8,600 workers were out sick on a single day with Covid-19 at the peak.

Ms. Saranathan, who works in Houston Methodist Hospital’s intermediate unit for sick patients who don’t need intensive care but are too sick for other departments, started a recent shift while an alarm blared, signaling a drop in oxygen levels of a Covid-19 patient.

She chose her career at age 15, after watching hospice nurses care for her grandmother, who was dying of cancer, and offer comfort to her mother, aunts and uncles.

Torey Boykin, her Covid-19 patient with the breathing difficulties, had been fully vaccinated and gotten a booster shot. But the 52-year-old was vulnerable to the virus because he had received a double-lung transplant three years earlier.



Two weeks into his latest hospitalization, Mr. Boykin still needed a machine to push air into his lungs. “In through the nose,” Ms. Saranathan said to him, coaching him how to breathe properly using the machine. “Out through the mouth.”

The oxygen alarms and rush to insert breathing tubes down the throats of Covid-19 patients are features of recent shifts, she said. Many of the hospital’s recent Covid-19 patients are severely ill, suffering from low oxygen levels, irregular heart rhythms or strokes, and require close care.

The workload was so heavy on a recent day that Ms. Saranathan was only able to pause briefly for lunch 10 hours into her 12-hour shift.

The ninth-floor unit typically cares for patients without Covid-19, but has been turning over beds to pandemic treatment during the Omicron surge. On this day, Mr. Boykin was among nine virus patients, up from none a week earlier.

The latest Covid-19 patient in the unit had just arrived after waiting 26 hours in the emergency room for an available spot.

One of the unit’s 19 beds had been closed for months because of chronic staffing shortages. The unit was short two nurses one recent evening, and risked closing at least three more beds without replacements, said Belinda Metts, the nurse manager.

To offset the crunch, Ms. Metts said she has been begging staff to work overtime and stepping in to help. The hospital also has some extra nurses from staffing agencies and others deployed by the state, and asked some nurses to care for more patients than they normally would during each shift.

Ms. Saranathan said she has been working one extra 12-hour shift on top of the two she is typically scheduled to help out. Yet she turns away more, she said, because the toll is so great.

“Emotionally, it is a lot,” she said.

A Catholic, she attends morning Mass on her days off and lights prayer candles for patients at home.

Especially hard to take, she said, is that patients have had to die alone because the hospital has restricted visitors to prevent contagion.

Ms. Saranathan asked when the deaths will stop. After 22 years as a nurse, she has considered quitting, but said she would feel guilty that she wasn’t helping.

“I feel like we’re not winning,” she said. “I feel like we’re losing. Two years later, we’re still losing this fight.”

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HEADLINE	01/23 Food system under renewed strain
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/from-plants-to-store-shelves-u-s-food-supply-is-under-pressure-11642933805?mod=hp_lead_pos2">https://www.wsj.com/articles/from-plants-to-store-shelves-u-s-food-supply-is-under-pressure-11642933805?mod=hp_lead_pos2</a>
GIST	<p>The U.S. food system is under renewed strain as Covid-19’s <a href="#">Omicron variant</a> stretches workforces from processing plants to grocery stores, leaving gaps on supermarket shelves.</p> <p>In Arizona, one in 10 processing plant and distribution workers at a major produce company were recently out sick. In Massachusetts, employee illnesses have slowed the flow of fish to supermarkets and restaurants. A grocery chain in the U.S. Southeast had to hire temporary workers after roughly one-third of employees at its distribution centers fell ill.</p>

Food-industry executives and analysts warn that the situation could persist for weeks or months, even as [the current wave of Covid-19](#) infections eases. Recent virus-related absences among workers have added to continuing supply and transportation disruptions, keeping some foods scarce.

Nearly two years ago, Covid-19 lockdowns drove a surge in grocery buying that [cleared store shelves of products](#) such as meat, [baking ingredients](#) and [paper goods](#).

Now some executives say [supply challenges](#) are worse than ever. The lack of workers leaves a broader range of products in short supply, food-industry executives said, with availability sometimes changing daily.

Eddie Quezada, produce manager at a Stop & Shop store in Northport, N.Y., said Omicron has stretched his department more than any previous wave of the pandemic, with one in five of his staff contracting Covid-19 in early January. Deliveries also have taken a hit, he said: Earlier in the month he received only 17 of the 48 cases of strawberries he had ordered.

“There is a domino effect in operations,” Mr. Quezada said.

At a Piggly Wiggly franchisee in Alabama and Georgia, about one-third of pickers needed to organize products and load trucks at the grocery chain’s distribution centers were out sick in the first week of January, said Keith Milligan, its controller. The company has been struggling to get food to stores on time due to driver shortages and staffing issues that haven’t improved, Mr. Milligan said, leaving Piggly Wiggly to change its ordering and stocking plans daily in some cases. Frozen vegetables and canned biscuits are running low, he said.

[In-stock levels of food products](#) at U.S. retailers hit 86% for the week ended Jan. 16, according to data from market-research firm IRI. That is lower than last summer and pre-pandemic levels of more than 90%. Sports drinks, frozen cookies and refrigerated dough are especially low, with in-stock levels in the 60% to 70% range. In-stock rates are lower in states such as Alaska and West Virginia, IRI data show.

“We were expecting supply issues to get resolved as we go into this period right now. Omicron has put a bit of a dent on that,” Vivek Sankaran, chief executive of Albertsons Cos., said on a Jan. 11 call with analysts. He said the Boise, Idaho-based supermarket giant expects more supply challenges over the next month or so.

Similar challenges at packaged-food and meatpacking plants mean that shortages could linger, industry officials and analysts said. The Agriculture Department showed cattle slaughter and beef production over the week of Jan. 14 were down about 5% from a year earlier, with hog slaughtering down 9%. Chicken processing was about 4% lower over the week ending Jan. 8, the USDA said. Labor shortages are also affecting milk processing and cheese production, according to the agency.

Because it often takes weeks for meat to reach store shelves from the plants, the current Omicron-related labor problems at producers could prolong supply issues, said Christine McCracken, executive director of meat research at agricultural lender Rabobank. “This might mean less meat for longer,” she said.

Lamb Weston Holdings Inc., the top North American seller of frozen potato products, said in January it expected labor challenges to continue affecting production rates and throughput in its plants, where staffing shortages have already disrupted operations. Conagra Brands Inc., which makes Birds Eye frozen vegetables and Slim Jim meat snacks, said earlier this month that more of its employees have been testing positive for Covid-19 at a time when elevated consumer demand already is outpacing the company’s available supplies.

In Massachusetts, Tom Zaffiro is struggling to move fish to grocery stores and restaurants. Mr. Zaffiro, president of Channel Fish Processing Co., said the company is only able to run at 80% capacity on days when key workers are out, while short-handedness at trucking companies and breeding suppliers make it

still harder to prepare and transport the company's fish. Channel has tripled lead times for customers, he said, and those that don't meet a minimum order aren't guaranteed supplies at all.

Vegetable suppliers in the West, which provide the bulk of America's leafy greens during the winter, also face production challenges.

Steve Church, co-chairman at Church Brothers Farms, a California-based produce company, said some 10% of employees at his Arizona vegetable processing plant and distribution facility were out sick on any given day earlier this month. That number dropped last week, and Mr. Church said he still has been able to fill orders, but he worries about the toll the added work is taking on Church's remaining employees, who are working overtime to keep fresh-cut vegetables and bagged salads moving to grocers and restaurants such as Walmart Inc. and Chipotle Mexican Grill Inc.

"Those people are tired and they want days off," said Mr. Church. "It's a vicious circle."

Food companies and supermarket chains' costs are rising as they struggle to operate with fewer employees. In Northport, Stop & Shop has offered unionized employees overtime pay to cover shifts for sick staff and asked part-time employees to work longer hours, said Mr. Quezada, the produce manager, adding that staffing and deliveries are improving in his department.

Stop & Shop said it is experiencing the impact of the latest increase in Covid-19 cases like other businesses across the country. The company said it doesn't anticipate disruptions to customers' shopping experience and that it has plans in place to continue operating.

Midwest-based Angelo Caputo's Fresh Markets has been running low on frozen breakfast products, canned beans and other items, and has been buying whatever it can get to keep its shelves stocked, said Dan O'Neill, director of center store and perishables at the grocer.

"We are not seeing any kind of relief," Mr. O'Neill said, adding that the company is trying to secure more inventory from alternative suppliers.

Brandon Johnson, president of Korth Transfer, a Wisconsin-based trucking company that hauls goods ranging from vinegar to beer, said the latest wave of Covid-19 cases has hit Korth's employees nearly as hard as the pandemic's earliest phase. Mr. Johnson said he has grown accustomed to telling customers he simply doesn't have drivers left to move their loads.

Mr. Johnson said he spent about 20 days behind the wheel of his own trucks last year, including a 500-mile round-trip journey to ferry a load of soy sauce from its manufacturer to a condiment supplier for use in a teriyaki recipe.

"It makes it easy to say we're tapped," Mr. Johnson said, referring to his days spent filling in as a driver. "I can say, 'I have no more to give. We've got everyone we can working for you.'"

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HEADLINE	01/23 'Great bacon crisis' has yet to arrive
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jan/23/california-bacon-crisis-animal-welfare-standards">https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jan/23/california-bacon-crisis-animal-welfare-standards</a>
GIST	<p>In the months leading up to the arrival of a strict new animal welfare law in California, headlines warned of a "<a href="#">Great California bacon crisis</a>". The law sets minimum living-space requirements for breeding pigs, which restaurants <a href="#">said</a> could make bacon more expensive and harder to get.</p> <p>But so far, the pork apocalypse has yet to arrive.</p> <p>"There seems to be little disruption," said Ronald Fong, the president of the <a href="#">California</a> Grocers Association, of the law that took effect this month. "We just have not seen a pork shortage."</p>

California voters [approved the law](#), known as Prop 12, in 2018. It creates minimum space requirements for animals raised to be sold in California, including pigs, calves and chickens. A vital element of the law is that even if a producer is based outside California, they have to follow the rules if they want to sell inside the state.

Breeding pigs must have at least 24 square feet per sow – the size of two large bath towels. While it doesn't sound like a lot, it's a big change from the crates many animals live in.

"This is a giant leap forward," said Vicky Bond, a veterinarian with the non-profit international animal advocacy group the Humane League. "It's the strongest law we've ever seen," adding that the law puts California ahead of the European Union in terms of animal welfare.

The lack of disruption in California's pork supply chain so far could be due to the fact that pork produced before 31 December 2021 is considered compliant, and grocers and restaurants can keep inventory for five to six months before it needs to be sold. That means the final supply of 2021 pork is due to arrive in June.

Industry groups, however, have continued to protest against the law, saying it will destabilize the multibillion-dollar US pork supply chain by raising the cost of raising animals. California consumes about 14% of the country's pork yet only 4% of existing sow housing nationwide meets Prop 12's standards, according to a 2021 report by the financial services company Rabobank.

Big pork producers [have already pulled some products out](#) of the state. And a legal challenge is snaking its way up to the supreme court, filed by the National Pork Producers, though the court rejected a [similar challenge](#) last June.

"This will cost the average family farm \$15m to \$17m," Michael Formica, the general counsel for the National Pork Producers Council, told a [news station in San Diego](#). "We believe it's entirely unconstitutional."

A second legal challenge has been lodged by the grocers, restaurants and the Hispanic chamber of commerce. The suit says that the exact rules haven't yet been drafted by the California department of food and agriculture, leaving them with little clue as to what actual compliance will mean. "We're not against Prop 12," said Fong, one of the plaintiffs in the challenge. "Our issue is: give us clear regulations and ample time to comply and we will."

The plaintiffs point out that [Proposition 2](#) – another animal welfare law, passed by California voters in 2008, that said animals must be able to turn around freely in their living spaces – was much more narrow in scope in that it applied only to California farmers, and yet it still took more than six years to be implemented. They are asking for 28 months to get into line with the new regulations. Right now, Fong said, the law is in place but he hasn't heard of any enforcement around pork products sold in California.

Not everyone is concerned, though. A Whole Foods Market spokesperson told [the San Francisco Chronicle](#) that the grocery chain doesn't expect to see any price increases or shortages of pork as a result of Prop 12 this year because Whole Foods already maintains animal welfare requirements.

A [University of California Davis study](#) estimated Prop 12 would raise production costs about 15% per market hog, but that the cost passed to the consumer would be less. The researchers predict an 8% increase in the price of uncooked pork, equal to about \$0.25 per pound, which would work out to Californians paying \$3.55 for a pound of pork compared with an average retail price of \$3.30.

Rebecca Boehm, an economist with the Union of Concerned Scientists, said she found it curious that profitable Fortune 500 companies like JVS, Tyson and Smithfield haven't figured out a way to adapt to the new rules – especially since they are clearly what voters want. "This competitive business spirit, how is that not driving a change?" she said. "People can vote with their dollar or with a ballot, and they voted for this. They should meet that demand."

Bond said that similar animal welfare laws were in force, including in states like Massachusetts. “As people become aware of factory farming, they absolutely vote to ban these systems. This form of intensive farming can’t continue.”

She noted that the pork industry and the egg industry had acted very differently in the face of the new legislation. According to an [analysis by the Humane League](#), in 2015, just 6% of US hens were raised cage-free. Now, 29% are, as consumers have pressed for higher welfare standards. “The egg industry saw the writing on the wall, that now is the time to invest in the systems of the future,” said Bond. “Whereas the pork industry spent the last three years fighting instead of preparing.”

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HEADLINE	01/23 Still a struggle: experts say schools safe
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/jan/23/public-health-experts-say-schools-safe">https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/jan/23/public-health-experts-say-schools-safe</a>
GIST	<p>Short-term school closures across the US amid the Omicron surge have reignited debate about how to protect the nation’s students and teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic.</p> <p>Public health experts have found themselves squeezed between exhausted parents and teachers, as schools try to keep children learning in-person despite the recent swell in cases.</p> <p>“This is such a highly charged emotional issue,” said Gigi Gronvall, a senior scholar at Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Health Security, who has helped advise Baltimore city public schools on how to return to in-person instruction.</p> <p>“All I can say is – there exists tools that can make the school safer and not have this kind of spread you would expect to have outside of the school.”</p> <p>Air filtration systems, ventilation, universal masking and most importantly vaccination reduce spread of Covid-19.</p> <p>Across the country, the overwhelming majority of schools are open and providing in-person instruction, as public health authorities have recommended. However, local school districts have also found themselves battling to convince both teachers and parents that school is a safe place.</p> <p>“I have gotten a lot of pushback on all of these things,” Gronvall said. People have said, “‘Well, the kids don’t really wear their masks all the time,’ or the air purifiers – ‘How do we know they’re working?’ or the ventilation in the building.”</p> <p><a href="#">Multiple studies</a> have shown schools that implement layered approaches to Covid-19 safety – such as ventilation, vaccination, cohort surveillance testing and masking – are largely safe and unlikely to drive coronavirus transmission.</p> <p>Nevertheless, local teachers unions have <a href="#">received attention</a> for demands to return to remote learning, a strategy public health experts said will not reduce the prevalence of Covid-19. Some parents have been reluctant to send children to school, while others do not support vaccine mandates, as education is yet again disrupted.</p> <p>The pinch for public health experts comes as staff shortages have closed schools due to illness as the Omicron variant sweeps across the country. There are nearly 100,000 public schools in the US, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, and more than 6,200 were disrupted the week of 10 January, according to data from school closure trackers at <a href="#">Burbio</a>, the highest number since school started this fall.</p> <p>“We have to look at the spectrum of illness we’re seeing in kids, and even adults now, and ask ourselves whether the risk to children’s education loss and accumulating mental health issues is not much more serious for families than from Covid-19,” said Dr David Rubin, director of the Children’s Hospital of</p>

Philadelphia's (Chop) PolicyLab and a professor of pediatrics at the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania.

Most experts believe it is too early to relegate the risks of Covid-19 to part of everyday life. Nevertheless, Rubin said, "The pandemic is really transitioning."

When Chop issued [in-person schools guidance](#) to reflect that transition, including a call to end all testing of asymptomatic individuals, which the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) continues to recommend, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers objected.

The guidelines feel "like a very ill-advised effort to downplay Covid cases and sweep our concerns regarding a massive surge under the rug," the federation's president, Jerry Jordan, said in a [press release](#). Jordan declined a request for an interview and for comment. The union later called for a "pause" to in-person education to address safety concerns.

"What we're trying to do is help people recalibrate that some of these interventions are going to be moving away," said Rubin. "The scaffolding is going to begun coming down." The hospital, he said, is trying to "change the public perception after a very traumatizing experience".

"Vaccinations and boosters are really the intervention," said Rubin. "It's not clear to me closing schools will change the risks – it will just increase the negative consequences without a clear benefit to reducing transmission risk."

The [most prominent local school closures](#) to result from union action [took place in Chicago](#) – the nation's third-largest school district – after a dispute between the Chicago Teachers Union and the district over safety protocols. The two sides eventually struck a deal, which included provision of KN95 masks for students and staff and the availability of weekly Covid testing.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has repeatedly emphasized schools should be back to in-person learning, and the majority of teachers support that, as long as they feel that adequate safety precautions are in place.

In Columbus, Ohio, more than [2,800 teachers](#), about two-thirds of the union, signed [an open letter](#) calling on the city to "immediately institute a two-week temporary remote learning pause to get us through the worst of the current COVID-19 Omicron surge".

"From a health and safety perspective, which is my lens, we do know that sending students home for two weeks is not going to change the community rate of Covid," said Dr Sara Bode, a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics council on school health, the medical director of Nationwide children's hospital's school-based health and mobile clinics, and now the district medical consultant to Columbus city schools.

What's more, she said students have become the "silent sufferers" of the pandemic, and now have higher rates of mental illness as a result of isolation and the loss of a safety net school provides. In the 2020-2021 school year, Columbus students had just 19 days of in-person school. Data have shown multi-layered safety approaches ensure that "school is not an independent driver of the rate" of infection, said Bode.

Meanwhile, some parents have advocated for remote education because of concerns about the Omicron variant.

"The decisions parents are making about schooling right now are very much a product of the kinds of challenges and constraints they're facing in their lives," said Jessica McCrory Calarco, an associate professor of sociology at Indiana University who has interviewed hundreds of parents about their feelings on education amid the pandemic, and who has two young children herself. "The pandemic has not affected every family equally".



In a [paper under review](#) for an academic journal, Calarco found white and higher income families were more likely to be “desperate” to have children return to in-person education, compared with families of color.

Although the correlation was not “one-to-one,” Calarco said white, higher income families were less likely to live near family, more likely to have two parents working full-time and more often cited demanding workloads. Parents of color and low-income parents were more likely to lose a job as a result of the pandemic so have a parent home, live in multi-generational households or have underlying health conditions that could increase risk of infection, Calarco said.

“There are widely varied opinions among parents about what steps schools should be taking at this point,” said Calarco. Notably, a large majority support mask mandates, about 70%, while only about one-third support a vaccine mandate for children.

That is reflected back in childhood vaccination data – just 18.8% of children aged five to 11 and 54.6% of children aged 12 to 17 are [vaccinated](#). Part of the discrepancy in that rate is probably because older children became eligible for vaccination before younger children.

Concerns about kids contracting Covid-19 in school and mandatory quarantines mean some teachers have faced [half empty classrooms](#) after winter break. In just one example, school authorities said [40% of students](#) were absent in Rochester, New York, when winter break ended.

In Newark, New Jersey, which temporarily returned to remote education after winter break, parents said emotions ranged from excitement to angst when children returned to the classroom earlier this month.

After interviewing hundreds of parents and conducting a national survey, Calarco said one theme rang throughout: a desire to return to normal. “Parents are most frustrated by the ambiguity,” Calarco said.

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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Russia military on the move to Ukraine</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/23/russian-ships-tanks-and-troops-on-the-move-to-ukraine-as-peace-talks-stall">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/23/russian-ships-tanks-and-troops-on-the-move-to-ukraine-as-peace-talks-stall</a>
GIST	<p>Russia has sent troops more than 4,000 miles to Ukraine’s borders and announced sweeping naval drills as Moscow expands its preparations for a <a href="#">potential attack on Ukraine</a> as negotiations appear at a deadlock.</p> <p>Six Russian landing ships capable of carrying main battle tanks, troops and other military vehicles travelled through the Channel en route to the Mediterranean last week in a deployment that could bolster an amphibious landing on Ukraine’s southern coast if Vladimir Putin orders an attack. Ukraine’s military intelligence has claimed that Russia is hiring mercenaries and supplying its proxy forces in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions with fuel, tanks and self-propelled artillery in preparation for a <a href="#">potential upsurge in fighting</a>.</p> <p>And a large military force, including Iskander short-range ballistic missiles, elite spetsnaz troops and anti-aircraft batteries, has arrived in Belarus from Russia’s eastern military district, an extraordinary deployment that western officials and analysts say could enable Moscow to threaten Kyiv, Ukraine’s capital.</p> <p>The new deployments have worried US officials. “What concerns us is the total picture,” said a senior state department official in a briefing last week. “It is the amassing of 100,000 troops along Ukraine’s borders combined with moving forces into Belarus over the weekend ... these numbers are beyond, of course, what we would expect with regard to a normal exercise.”</p> <p>The new forces in Belarus, the official added, represent an “increased capability for <a href="#">Russia</a> to launch this attack, increased opportunity, increased avenues, increased routes”.</p>



The US president, [Joe Biden](#), last week said that Putin himself may not know what he plans to do. But the results are either reckless brinkmanship or preparations for a large-scale military operation.

“It gradually dawned on Putin that if he stays on the track of stable and predictable, as Biden indicated, he’s the designated loser,” said Pavel Baev, research professor at the Peace Research Institute Oslo and a Brookings Institution nonresident fellow. “Something needed to be done. He went for this escalation quite sharply.”

Diplomatic efforts last week were inconclusive. The Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, called talks with US secretary of state Antony Blinken [“frank and substantive”](#).

“I can’t say whether we are on the right track or not on the right track. We’ll understand that when we receive an American response on paper to all items of our proposals,” Lavrov told reporters in Geneva.

But there are no concrete plans for a follow-up and the two sides appear irreconcilable, with Russia’s foreign ministry repeating maximalist demands for Nato forces to [leave all countries that joined the alliance after 1997](#).

“What is happening on the Russian side in the last couple of weeks is not really diplomacy. It’s a combination of bluff, blackmail and warmongering,” said Baev during a roundtable discussion on Friday. As Russia’s buildup nears completion, US and European countries have stepped up military support for Ukraine. The UK last week sent more than 2,000 NLAW (next generation light anti-tank weapon) launchers and deployed about 30 troops from a new ranger regiment as trainers.

Estonia has said it will provide Javelin anti-tank missiles, while Lithuania and Latvia will send Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. In a shift, the Netherlands also said it would be ready to provide defensive weapons to Ukraine. And the US has said it will increase aid and send Mi-17 transport helicopters originally meant for use in Afghanistan to Ukraine instead.

The decision to fast-track arms to Ukraine reflects an understanding that Russia could launch an attack at any moment. “We know that there are plans in place to increase that force even more on very short notice, and that gives President Putin the capacity, also on very short notice, to take further aggressive action against Ukraine,” Blinken said in public remarks last week.

The scope of a Russian attack and its ultimate goals remain unclear. Some analysts have suggested Russia may want to formally annex the Donbas region or capture territory to connect the Russian mainland with Crimea, the Ukrainian peninsula [annexed by Russia in 2014](#).

But others see Moscow’s larger aim as compelling the Ukrainian government to submit to Russia’s terms, effectively re-establishing a sphere of influence in eastern Europe. And that ambitious goal could mean that a Russian attack would have to put extraordinary pressure on the Ukrainian government.

“If the purpose is to compel Ukraine’s leadership, then a ground invasion only makes sense if it puts Ukraine in a more untenable or threatened position. Neither a land bridge nor an operation in Odessa would likely achieve that result, but an offensive towards Kyiv could,” wrote Rob Lee, a former US marine and a fellow in the Foreign Policy Research Institute’s Eurasia programme, in an [analysis](#).

Ultimately, Russia wants to block Ukraine’s entrance into [Nato](#), stymie cooperation with western powers and reverse Kyiv’s trajectory away from Moscow.

To that end, it has sought to put Ukraine in a position that would stretch its defences and threaten a potential hammer blow against Kyiv. Russia has deployed more than 60 battalion tactical groups – more than a third of the military’s total available force – and appears unwilling to halt its buildup on Ukraine’s borders.

	<p>Russian troops, along with Iskander short-range ballistic missiles, began arriving in Belarus last week after travelling across the country from Russia's far east.</p> <p>The troops are arriving for joint military exercises set for mid-February and will include Russian Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets and nearly the entire Belarusian armed forces, according to the country's leader, Alexander Lukashenko. "Don't get into [a fight] with us," said Lukashenko in punchy remarks on Friday. "We can't be defeated."</p> <p>At the same time, Russia has announced sweeping naval drills that will include every fleet in the country's navy, numbering more than 140 warships. Along with the six landing craft likely headed for the Mediterranean, a Russian cruiser and destroyer will also be dispatched following the exercises.</p> <p>Nato has also announced its own naval drills, including a US aircraft carrier strike group in the Mediterranean for the next two weeks, meaning that the two rivals will be conducting exercises at the same time amid heightened tensions.</p> <p>Russia appears to be finalising its preparations for a strike on Ukraine. But even if the attack never comes, analysts say that there may never be a return to the status quo before the Russian buildup began last year. "I think it's clear that even if a war is avoided, I don't think we're going to go back to the situation prior to April 2021," said Angela Stent, director emerita of the Center for Russian, East European and Eurasian studies at Georgetown University and a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.</p> <p>During a roundtable discussion, she said that the crisis could lead to the "third reorganisation of Euro-Atlantic security since the 1940s".</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>01/23 Beijing district orders mass virus testing</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/23/beijing-district-orders-mass-virus-testing-ahead-o/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/23/beijing-district-orders-mass-virus-testing-ahead-o/</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>BEIJING — People in a Beijing district with some 2 million residents were ordered Sunday to undergo mass coronavirus testing following a series of infections as China tightened anti-disease controls ahead of the Winter Olympics.</p> <p>The government told people in areas of the Chinese capital deemed at high risk for infection not to leave the city after 25 cases were found in the Fengtai district and 14 elsewhere.</p> <p>The ruling Communist Party is stepping up enforcement of its "zero tolerance" strategy aimed at isolating every infected person as Beijing prepares to open the Winter Games on Feb. 4 under intensive anti-virus controls.</p> <p>On Sunday, Fengtai residents lined up on snow-covered sidewalks in freezing weather for testing.</p> <p>The Chinese capital must "take the most resolute, decisive and strict measures to block the transmission chain of the epidemic," a city government spokesman, Xu Hejian, told a news conference.</p> <p>"In principle, personnel in risk areas shall not leave Beijing," Xu said.</p> <p>Nationwide, 56 new confirmed infections were reported in the 24 hours through midnight Saturday. The National Health Commission said 37 were believed to have been acquired abroad.</p> <p>China has reported 4,636 deaths out of 105,603 confirmed cases and seven suspected cases since the pandemic began.</p> <p>The Olympics are being held under strict controls that are meant to isolate athletes, reporters and officials from the outside world. Athletes are required to be vaccinated or undergo a quarantine after arriving in China.</p>

	Other outbreaks prompted the government to impose travel bans on the major cities of Xi'an and Tianjin.
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Judge halts vax mandate federal workers</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/21/texas-federal-judge-halts-bidens-covid-19-vaccine/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/21/texas-federal-judge-halts-bidens-covid-19-vaccine/</a>
GIST	<p>A federal judge issued an order Friday halting President Biden's order that all federal employees get the coronavirus vaccine or risk losing their jobs, saying the president overstepped the bounds of his powers.</p> <p>Judge <a href="#">Jeffrey Vincent Brown</a>, a Trump appointee to the bench in Texas, issued a nationwide injunction.</p> <p><a href="#">His</a> ruling follows a decision last week by the Supreme Court that halted yet another Biden COVID-19 vaccine mandate for large businesses.</p> <p>Of four major vaccine mandates the Biden administration has promulgated, three are now blocked.</p> <p>Judge Brown said the case involving federal workers isn't about whether people should get vaccinated, saying, "The court believes they should." Nor is it about whether the federal government as a whole could require its employees to get the shots.</p> <p>Instead, it is about whether Mr. Biden, acting as chief executive, can issue an order that millions of people undergo a medical procedure.</p> <p>"That, under the current state of the law as just recently expressed by the Supreme Court, is a bridge too far," the judge ruled.</p> <p>White House press secretary Jen Psaki, reacting soon after the decision, said it would be up to the Justice Department to decide next steps, but she suggested the idea of the mandate has already worked.</p> <p>"First, let me update you that 98% of federal workers are vaccinated. That is a remarkable number," she said.</p> <p>She also said the administration was "confident in our legal authority here."</p> <p>In arguing its case to Judge Brown, the Biden administration had pointed to several sections of the law that said the president gets to set rules and regulations governing federal workers' conduct and conditions of employment. Justice Department lawyers said getting vaccinated falls under on-the-job conduct.</p> <p>Feds for Medical Freedom, the group that challenged the mandate in this case, argued that being vaccinated against the deadly virus wasn't conduct but rather status. And even if it is judged to be conduct, it's not "workplace" conduct.</p> <p>Judge Brown agreed.</p> <p>He said the Supreme Court's ruling last week against the large-business mandate found that COVID is not an issue unique to the workplace, so a vaccine mandate can't be shoehorned into an order regarding work conduct.</p> <p>Judge Brown was racing to beat a Jan. 21 deadline, which was the earliest point at which any of the plaintiffs involved in the case might face discipline.</p> <p>His order applies not just to the members of Feds for Medical Freedom but to all federal employees. Judge Brown said trying to draw a narrow injunction was impractical.</p>

	<p>The four major vaccine mandates the Biden team imposed last year covered federal employees, federal contractors, workers at businesses with at least 100 employees, and medical workers who are funded by federal money through Medicare or Medicaid.</p> <p>Of those, only the health care worker mandate remains in place, covering about 10 million people.</p> <p>The Supreme Court last week ruled Congress did give the administration power in the medical area.</p> <p>But the justices blocked the large-business mandate from taking effect. The federal contractor mandate was blocked by lower courts.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Businesses: mandate or no mandate</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/21/mandate-or-no-mandate-businesses-take-divergent-pa/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/21/mandate-or-no-mandate-businesses-take-divergent-pa/</a>
GIST	<p>The Supreme Court’s decision to strike down President Biden’s vaccine mandate for the private sector is forcing big companies to take divergent paths with some requiring shots anyway and others deciding it is not worth the bother.</p> <p>In doing so, executives are dealing with a patchwork of local rules and double-edged pushback from employees who support or oppose mandates.</p> <p>Starbucks said it would no longer take steps to ensure workers are vaccinated or face weekly testing after the justices issued a stay against the Biden rule from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which would have imposed the same vaccinate-or-test rule on all companies with 100 or more workers as of Feb. 9.</p> <p>Carhartt, an apparel company, went in the opposite direction. It reminded employees they were subject to an in-house vaccine mandate regardless of the justices’ ruling.</p> <p>“We put workplace safety at the very top of our priority list, and the Supreme Court’s recent ruling doesn’t impact that core value,” Carhartt CEO Mark Valade wrote to workers. “An unvaccinated workforce is both a people and business risk that our company is unwilling to take.”</p> <p>Others companies are on the fence.</p> <p>Macy’s department stores began to request the vaccination status of its employees this month but told publications it was “evaluating this late-breaking development” from the court.</p> <p>A survey by Willis Towers Watson in November found that a third of companies would only forge ahead with mandates if the OSHA rule took effect.</p> <p>Now that the justices have blocked it, companies are forced to navigate the landscape without a roadmap from Washington.</p> <p>“In the absence of that, the CEOs are going to proceed on their own and see what their competitors are doing, what works in their workplace,” said Dan Meyer, managing partner of the Tully Rinckey law firm’s Washington office. “We are in a balkanized decision-making arena right now.”</p> <p>Carhartt’s memo doubling down on the mandate prompted an outcry and calls for a boycott from those who oppose vaccine mandates, even as the union Starbucks Workers United slammed the coffee chain for failing to discuss the issue or negotiate with unionized partners at two locations in the Buffalo, New York, area.</p>

“This comes after partners at [one location] raised COVID safety concerns that the company rebuffed. Once again, this shows why Starbucks partners need a union to have a voice in these critical matters,” the union said in a statement to The Washington Times.

Starbucks’ corporate office simply made preparations to comply with the OSHA regulation in January and then complied with the ruling, which suspended the vaccinate-or-test regimen. It said the vast majority of company employees are fully vaccinated and it strongly encourages workers to get the shots.

“Given the court’s ruling, we expect more jurisdictions may move quickly to pass local mandates. Starbucks will continue to follow all laws, mandates and public health regulations,” wrote John Culver, the group president for North America and chief operating officer at Starbucks.

Indeed, local regulations and private employers’ decisions are dictating the way forward now, as Mr. Biden struggles to preserve his federal mandate.

A federal judge issued an order Friday halting Mr. Biden’s order that all federal employees get the coronavirus vaccine or risk losing their jobs, saying the president overstepped his powers.

Judge Jeffrey Vincent Brown, a Trump appointee to the bench in Texas, issued a nationwide injunction, meaning that of the four major vaccine mandates the Biden administration has promulgated, three are now blocked.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said it would be up to the Justice Department to decide the next steps but suggested the idea of the mandate has already worked.

“First, let me update you that 98% of federal workers are vaccinated. That is a remarkable number,” she said.

Private companies who believe in strong mandates are driving ahead regardless of the high-profile rulings.

“Biden’s failure to get OSHA mandates did not hugely overturn existing mandates in companies and health care institutions. Some big industries that were waiting did not proceed but many — I don’t know percentage — did not drop their existing requirements,” said Art Caplan, director of the division of medical ethics at the New York University Grossman School of Medicine.

Citigroup, a major bank, reported last week that 99% of its employees complied with its vaccine mandate before a Jan. 14 deadline.

Also, JP Morgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon recently told CNBC the bank will take a hard line at its New York City headquarters.

“To go to the office you have to be vaxxed and if you aren’t going to get vaxxed you won’t be able to work in that office,” he said last week. “And we’re not going to pay you not to work in the office.”

United Airlines, which loudly and proudly imposed mandate months ago, says its rules are preventing severe disease and death.

Even though 3,000 United Airlines workers were infected with the virus amid the omicron wave this month, “zero of our vaccinated employees are currently hospitalized,” CEO Scott Kirby said in a Jan. 11 letter to employees. “Prior to our vaccine requirement, tragically, more than one United employee on average per week was dying from COVID.”

Mr. Meyer said companies with a vaccine mandate will tend to have a more stable workforce but industries that suffer from high turnover rates might avoid mandates so they don’t lose workers who object to new rules.

	“Companies are going to do what’s prudent for the company’s business line,” he said. “The more we have to go through this, the more companies will get used to it.”
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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 Consequences: drop in college enrollment</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/01/22/college-enrollment-drop/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/01/22/college-enrollment-drop/</a>
GIST	<p>Slower economic growth. Continued labor shortages. Lower life expectancy. Higher levels of divorce. More demand for social services, but less tax revenue to pay for it.</p> <p>A sharp and persistent decline in the number of Americans going to college — <a href="#">down by nearly a million</a> since the start of the pandemic, according to newly released figures, and by <a href="#">nearly 3 million over the last decade</a> — could alter American society for the worse, even as economic rival nations such as China vastly increase university enrollment, researchers warn.</p> <p>“It is a crisis, and I don’t think it’s widely recognized yet that it is,” said Jason Lane, dean of Miami University’s College of Education, Health and Society.</p> <p>The reasons for the drop in college-going have been widely discussed — <a href="#">declining birthrates</a>, the widespread immediate availability of jobs, <a href="#">greater public skepticism</a> of the need for higher education — but the potential long-term effects of it have gotten less attention.</p> <p>People without education past high school earn significantly less than those who go on to earn bachelor’s degrees, and are more likely to live in poverty and less likely to be employed. They’re more prone to depression, live shorter lives, need more government assistance, pay less in taxes, divorce more frequently, and vote and volunteer less often.</p> <p>With fewer people going to college, “society is going to be less healthy,” Lane said. “It’s going to be less economically successful. It’s going to be harder to find folks to fill the jobs of the future, and there will be lower tax revenues because there won’t be as many people in high-paying jobs. It will be harder for innovation to occur.”</p> <p>The growing gap in educational attainment could also worsen existing divisions over politics, socioeconomic status, race and national origin, said Adriana Lleras-Muney, an economist at UCLA.</p> <p>“We’re seeing a lot more people moving into the very unlucky group instead of the lucky group,” said Lleras-Muney. “That will be very bad for them personally. It will start showing up in their health, their likelihood of remaining in marriage — you name it.”</p> <p>Among those most affected: children from low-income families, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, which reports <a href="#">“unprecedented” declines</a> in the number of students from high-poverty or low-income high schools who immediately go on to higher education.</p> <p>“The gains that we made in reducing class-based and racial inequality are being wiped away,” said Awilda Rodriguez, an associate professor at the University of Michigan Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education.</p> <p>Men in particular have disproportionately stopped going to college; undergraduate enrollment of men is <a href="#">down more than 10 percent</a> since the start of the pandemic.</p> <p>“What does that mean for the modern American family? There are implications here that just go miles and miles and miles,” said Monty Sullivan, president of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System. “We have a million adults in this country that have stepped off the path to the middle class. That’s the real headline.”</p>

High school graduates who don't go further in their educations [earned a median of \\$24,900 less](#) a year than people with bachelor's degrees, the College Board calculates.

They are [nearly 40 percent more likely to be unemployed](#), the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports, and nearly [four times more likely to be living in poverty](#), according to the Pew Research Center.

Because they earn less, [people whose formal education ends with high school pay 45 percent less](#) in local, state and federal taxes than people with bachelor's degrees, according to the College Board.

Yet they require greater social services. High school graduates who don't go on to college are two-and-a-half times more likely than those with bachelor's degrees [to receive Medicaid benefits](#), four times more likely to get food stamps and four times more likely to need public housing, the College Board finds, while their kids are three times more likely to qualify for free school lunches.

People without college educations also [are less likely to vote](#) than people with them, according to the Census Bureau; [half as likely to volunteer](#), the College Board says; and [more likely to divorce](#), reports the Bureau of Labor Statistics — almost half of married couples with less education split up, compared to 30 percent who are college graduates.

Various studies have found that [people without college educations even die younger](#) than people with them, from 5 to 12 years, depending on the study. In fact, life expectancy has increased since 2010 for people who went to college even as it's declined for those who didn't, according to researchers at the University of Texas at Austin and others.

"These life-expectancy gaps are just going to get even larger than they already are," said Lleras-Muney, who studies the connection between education and health. "We might not see that for a while because the cohorts that are graduating now are not going to start dying in significant numbers for another 40 or 50 years. But we will see people being in worse health."

Among other health indicators, people with only high school diplomas are [nearly four times more likely to smoke](#) than college graduates, according to the College Board, and researchers at the universities of Texas and South Carolina find they have [a higher incidence of depression](#).

All of these things are raising alarm about the broader impact of falling college enrollment on society and the economy.

Fewer college graduates mean not enough workers to fill high-paying jobs being left by fast-retiring baby boomers, for instance.

"There will be fewer jobs that people can get with just a high school diploma, so this will be an issue as more and more jobs require a college degree but fewer and fewer students go to college," said Jennifer Ma, senior policy research scientist at the College Board.

That means current-day labor shortages and logistics interruptions may be harbingers of things to come, said Lane, of Miami University.

"What we're seeing right now is hospitals understaffed, supply chain concerns, schools closing because we don't have enough people to keep them open," he said. "But what happens when we don't have enough people studying to be teachers, or to be nurses?"

Lower earnings also mean less consumer spending, which translates to slower growth and affects the broader standard of living.

America's college and university enrollment decline is taking place against a backdrop of aggressive investment in higher education by international economic rivals such as China.



The United States has [fallen from third to 12th](#) since 2000 among the 38 member nations of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in the proportion of its population age 25 to 34 with college degrees, behind Canada, Korea, Russia, and others.

If Americans keep choosing not to go to college, “the U.S. will continue its slide,” said Jamil Salmi, a global higher education expert and former higher education coordinator at the World Bank.

Although it’s still well behind the United States in the proportion of its population with degrees, China has [boosted its university enrollment sixfold](#) since 2000, to about 45 million, according to World Education Services, a nonprofit that evaluates international education credentials.

One upside, some policymakers said, is that a smaller supply of people with degrees will force employers to accelerate the budding practice of considering job and life experience instead.

“That’s something companies are already becoming much more focused on — what skills does someone have versus what piece of paper do they have,” Sullivan said.

Already, more listings for jobs that pay above the national median wage are [accepting applicants with less than bachelor’s degrees](#), a study by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia found.

However, that is more bad news for the sector that’s affected most immediately by the enrollment decline: [the \\$632 billion higher education industry](#), with many campuses struggling to fill seats.

That could force universities and colleges to lower barriers that prevent prospective students — especially lower-income ones — from getting degrees, Rodriguez said.

“We could be on the precipice of being pushed to thinking about how higher education could be more accessible, more equitable.”

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HEADLINE	01/22 Low-wage workers nursing homes quitting
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-v/2022/01/23/nursing-home-dc-staffing-omicron/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-v/2022/01/23/nursing-home-dc-staffing-omicron/</a>
GIST	<p>In the eight years she has worked at nursing homes, LaToya Francis, 34, has been yelled at, kicked at and had feces thrown at her for little more than the minimum wage. She endured it because she loved being a certified nursing assistant, she said.</p> <p>But she’s not sure she can hold out much longer.</p> <p>As the omicron variant of the <a href="#">coronavirus</a> drives record staff shortages at nursing homes nationwide, Francis has increasingly found herself alone on her 12-hour overnight shifts at Bridgepoint Healthcare’s skilled nursing facility in Southwest Washington, fighting off panic attacks as she tries to feed, clean and rotate more bed-bound residents than she can handle. Some nights, she retreats to a corner of the facility, where she calls her partner and sobs. Other nights, all she can feel is anger.</p> <p>“I’ve never, ever felt this disrespected,” Francis said.</p> <p>Frustration is surging among the low-wage workers who make up the backbone of the nursing home industry, as tens of thousands of their colleagues call out sick with covid-19, inflaming shortages that already were at crisis levels. Hailed as “heroes” during the early months of the pandemic, these workers, most of whom are women and people of color, say they’re facing untenable levels of pressure.</p> <p>Government support has failed to end the crisis, advocates say, allowing care for the elderly and the infirm to worsen, forcing facilities to limit admission or <a href="#">close entirely</a> and <a href="#">clogging up</a> hospital beds. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the nursing home industry <a href="#">has lost more than</a> 420,000 jobs since the start of the pandemic, reducing its workforce to the size it was 15 years ago.</p>

Some employees chose to retire early rather than face the intense workload and coronavirus risks at their jobs. Others have been lured away by companies, [including Amazon](#), that offer wages which nursing homes say they cannot compete with.

Even as the omicron [variant retreats](#), the staffing crunch will persist, nursing home leaders and unions say. At community colleges, interest in skilled nursing courses has plunged, with some class sizes dropping to half what they were before the pandemic. Of those training to become nursing assistants, many are avoiding nursing homes, where they would earn a median annual wage of \$30,120, according to federal data, and are looking instead for jobs as [travel nurses](#) or home health aides.

Meanwhile, the aging trend that the U.S. Census Bureau calls the “[gray tsunami](#)” looms ever closer, with all baby boomers — the original cohort was more than 70 million people — set to be at least age 65 by 2030.

That threat is now prompting alarm among elected officials over what workers such as Francis say they have known for years: They’re essential but underpaid and overworked.

“This is a crisis on steroids,” said David Grabowski, a Harvard Medical School researcher who studies the economics of aging and long-term care. “The long-standing issue of underinvesting and undervaluing this workforce is coming back to bite us.”

Bridgepoint Healthcare chief executive Marc Ferrell said that his company has tried to offer competitive wages but that it’s a “well-known fact” that the nursing home workforce has shrunk.

“This is a national issue,” he said, “not a Bridgepoint issue.”

#### **‘I can’t live like this’**

Few places in the United States [have been harder hit](#) by the omicron variant than the District of Columbia and the surrounding states, where new case counts per capita rose sharply in early January, outpacing the rates of infection in many jurisdictions with lower vaccination rates.

In Virginia, where 9,500 or so nursing home workers have left the industry since February 2020, about 2,700 care workers have tested positive for the coronavirus this month. In Maryland, 7 in 10 nursing homes have reported new outbreaks, and as many as 5,000 workers have had to stay home after testing positive, said Joseph DeMattos Jr., the president of the Health Facilities Association of Maryland.

D.C.’s health department did not respond to inquiries on infections at its long-term care facilities, but leaders at 1199 SEIU, a union that represents health-care workers in the District, said the staffing situation has never been worse.

All three jurisdictions reissued states of emergency to ease the staffing shortages, including by extending the expiration dates for nursing licenses and allowing nursing graduates to start work more quickly. Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan (R) also implemented [testing requirements](#) for staffers and visitors at nursing homes.

But such efforts fall far short of what is truly needed, workers say.

“It seems like the folks in charge ... are trying everything except what the front-line workers want,” said Yvonne Slosarski, a spokeswoman for the local 1199 SEIU division. “We know what actually retains workers: It’s more pay, more leave and safer working conditions.”

Rhonda Davis and Darrie Neely, both 61, agree. They left their nursing home jobs in Baltimore last year after developing covid-19.

Neely, who previously worked 30 years as a housekeeper, said she passed the virus on to multiple members of her family in the fall of 2020, when she decided the nursing home job wasn't worth it. "No one wants to stay for the money that they're paying," she said.

Davis, who was a cook for 19 years, said she's passionate about caring for older adults but grew sick of spending vacation days working because her supervisors were taking months to replace employees. Isolating alone in her apartment last November, the decision to resign became clear. "I can't live like this," she remembers telling herself.

Davis said what she grew to resent was the inequity. Nursing home workers are the lowest paid in the health-care industry. "Whether you scrub the floor in a nursing home or cook the meals, it matters," she said. "It matters to the residents."

Grabowski, the Harvard researcher, said the low pay for nursing home workers partly reflects the type of work and the type of worker that the country values. "There's some ageism, classism and racism at work here," he said.

But it also reflects the challenges of fixing an industry being taken over by [big corporations](#), [private-equity groups](#) and [investment-management firms](#) seeking to profit off elder care, Grabowski said. The federal government is the largest payer for long-term care through its Medicaid program. While advocates within and outside the industry agree nursing home workers ought to earn more, some worry that higher Medicaid reimbursement rates would just end up lining the pockets of facility owners, not staffers.

"If we're going to pay more," Grabowski said, "we also need to make sure the money is going toward what it's intended for."

A group of senators tried with the [Nursing Home Improvement and Accountability Act](#) last year. It would, among its provisions, establish minimum staffing levels at nursing homes and increase federal oversight of care. Some aspects of the bill were folded into President Biden's Build Back Better plan, which is caught in congressional gridlock.

### **'We're going to get through tonight'**

Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of nursing home workers nationwide continue their jobs. In Northeast Washington one recent evening, Francis leaned her 5-foot-9 frame over her kitchen counter, tapping on her phone to figure out her schedule. She started a second job as a home health aide, picking up shifts on days off to help with the mad scramble she goes through at the end of every month to afford rent, car payments, food and gas.

"My social worker just called," Candace Johnson, her fiancée, said. "We can get the car seat Tuesday." "Oh, clutch," Francis replied. "Oh, wait, no, no. I'm working the new job Tuesday."

There was only one pickup day for the free seat. Johnson, 43, sighed.

"I know that thing saves us \$80," Francis said. "Let me check the schedule again."

Johnson nodded. She had quit her job as a mechanic last year after the symptoms of her sickle cell disease worsened, becoming a stay-at-home parent to Francis's two children. It hurt her when Francis called from work to say she was again the only certified nursing assistant in her unit, or when she found Francis holding back tears as she stripped out of her scrubs at the door, afraid that she may have brought the virus home.

Francis had taken the overnight shift because it paid a higher rate: \$19 an hour. But now, Johnson said, Francis gets less than three hours of sleep most days before it was time to pick up the children from school.

"Everrrrrly!"

	<p>Gabriel, Francis's 11-year-old son, screeched. His 2-year-old sister was making a mess again. Francis marched into the little girl's room, picking her up with one hand and tickling her with the other. These two hours she had with her children before work were precious. Even when she was exhausted, she tried to be present.</p> <p>"Good job, big girl," she said, stroking Everly's hair as she swung her hips to the soundtrack of "Frozen" blaring from a tablet.</p> <p>In an ideal world, Francis said, she would be working during the day and taking classes at night to become a registered nurse. Other registered nurses had told her she'd be great at it, and she knew she would be, too. But she couldn't afford the time or the money, so she was stuck, she said, in a job that felt impossibly hard but far from "heroic."</p> <p>"When I can't even spend time sitting with someone in hospice who is near dying because I know there are 14 other people waiting for me, I don't feel like a hero," she said. "How can I?"</p> <p>Just after 6:30 p.m., Francis packed up her lunch and hugged her children.</p> <p>"We're going to get through tonight," Johnson said as she kissed her partner goodbye. Francis tightened her mouth into a small smile and headed out.</p> <p>The following night, as the city sheltered from a snowstorm, the nursing assistant did it all over again.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 Peru appeals international help for oil spill</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/22/peru-oil-spill-tonga-volcano/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/22/peru-oil-spill-tonga-volcano/</a>
GIST	<p>Peru has appealed for international assistance to respond to a major oil spill connected to the eruption of an underwater volcano near Tonga last week.</p> <p>An Italian-flagged tanker spilled 6,000 barrels of oil in the Pacific Ocean on Jan. 15, close to La Pampilla refinery outside Lima, Peruvian authorities said. The Spanish company Repsol, which operates the refinery, blamed the volcanic eruption near Tonga that <a href="#">sent large tsunami waves across the ocean</a>.</p> <p>The eruption triggered tsunami warnings in neighboring countries Chile and Ecuador, but Peru did not issue a similar alert. Two women in northern Peru were reportedly swept out to sea and drowned when massive waves crashed over a beach.</p> <p>The Italian shipping company transporting the oil said the tanker was unloading its cargo at La Pampilla, the country's largest refinery, when the terminal's underwater pipeline ruptured. An oil spot was discovered near the ship, and the company, Fratelli d'Amico Armatori, <a href="#">said</a> staff on board immediately turned off the valves and notified authorities.</p> <p>Repsol said unusual waves linked to the volcanic eruption caused the accident.</p> <p>The next day, Repsol characterized the spill as "limited" and said it had been "contained." But it quickly became clear that it was more significant than the company had initially claimed.</p> <p>Peruvian authorities estimated that the spill affected nearly 200,000 square feet of beach on the country's Pacific coast. Twenty-one beaches were contaminated, the government said.</p> <p>After touring blackened beaches and surveying the coast from a helicopter in recent days, Peruvian President Pedro Castillo pledged to mitigate the environmental effects of the spill and called on Repsol to take responsibility and provide compensation. He said Thursday that he was convening a crisis committee to propose next steps.</p>

The company has denied responsibility and said maritime authorities failed to warn of unusual waves after the volcanic eruption, [according to Agence France-Presse](#).

Castillo described the spill as the biggest “ecological disaster” to befall the South American country in recent years, [Al Jazeera reported](#). Dead seals, fish and birds smothered in oil have washed ashore and fishing in the affected area is temporarily prohibited.

“Fishermen used to go sell the seafood that we collect. But now everything smells like death,” fisherman Walter de la Cruz [told Reuters](#).

Crews wearing protective gear have fanned out across the affected beaches in a cleaning effort that Repsol said will take until the end of February. Repsol said it deployed more than 8,000 feet of containment booms — temporary floating barriers designed to contain oil spills — and 840 people to clean up the oil spill. More than 53,000 cubic feet of oil had been removed as of Friday, the company said.

“Repsol reaffirms its commitment to continue mitigating and remedying the effects of the spill,” it said in a statement Thursday, pledging to work with the authorities and local fishing community to respond effectively and transparently.

The company said it was conducting its own investigation into the spill.

Affected beaches were closed, and Peruvian health authorities warned locals to avoid affected areas, refrain from touching dead animals and immediately go to a health center if they experience signs of poisoning from toxic substances.

The Pacific waters around Peru are known for their biodiversity, and the spill has already caused devastating environmental impacts. Images showed beaches blanketed with oil and workers in overalls coated with the substance. Biologists from Peru’s national service charged with managing protected areas have been working to scrub oil off drenched sea birds.

The spill threatens two protected areas — the Ancón Reserved Zone and the Pescadores islets — that house wildlife including Humboldt penguins and sea otters, the environmental nonprofit Oceana Peru said in a [news release](#) this week.

The [organization warned](#) that the recovery of the ecosystem could take years. It decried what it described as the country’s “weak and inefficient” tsunami warning systems and delayed containment measures. The news release pointed to reports from the region that shovels, wheelbarrows and “other tools of limited scope and effectiveness” were being used in the cleanup.

Juan Carlos Riveros, Oceana Peru’s scientific director, [told the Associated Press](#) that guano birds, seagulls, terns, tendrils, sea lions and dolphins were among the species hardest hit by the spill.

The government has requested international assistance with the response efforts. Prime Minister Mirtha Vásquez said the United Nations will provide a team of experts to help, [the Associated Press reported](#).

Peru is also one of the world’s largest fish-producing countries, [according to the United Nations](#). Peruvians rely on fish for food and livelihoods. Dozens of fishermen [protested](#) outside La Pampilla on Tuesday, holding signs reading, “No to ecological crime” and “Repsol killer of marine fauna.” A demonstration against Repsol also took place in Lima on Friday.

Repsol said it would hire local fishermen to help with the cleanup, and Vásquez said the company had promised to deliver food baskets to affected families.

	<p>Castillo, a leftist populist elected in the summer on promises to fight poverty and take on foreign mining interests, has sought to connect his government's actions to address the oil spill to his environmental program.</p> <p>A beach affected by the oil spill served as the backdrop on Thursday for Castillo's declaration of a national environmental emergency aimed also at addressing the longer-term challenge of climate change. The decree requires the government to set commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate the effects of climate change.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 Dangerous: failed China promise in Serbia</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/22/world/europe/china-serbia-vietnamese-workers.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/22/world/europe/china-serbia-vietnamese-workers.html</a>
GIST	<p>ZRENJANIN, Serbia — Seeking escape from grinding poverty in northern Vietnam, the 43-year-old farmer labored for years on construction sites in Kuwait and Uzbekistan before being offered a ticket to what he was told would be “the promised land” — Europe, and a job with a good salary.</p> <p>“I wanted to go to the West to change my life,” the farmer, a father of three who asked that his name not be used to avoid retribution from his employer, recalled in an interview.</p> <p>His life certainly changed: It got much worse.</p> <p>The job turned out to be in Serbia, one of Europe's poorest nations, with a Chinese company whose gigantic tire factory now under construction in the northern city of Zrenjanin has become a symbol of the chasm between the alluring promise of investment from China and the sometimes grim reality on the ground.</p> <p>Touted as China's biggest industrial investment in Europe, the \$900 million Ling Long Tire factory is now a magnet of criticism for a Serbian government that opponents accuse of no-questions-asked subservience to China. Workers and activists say problems like human trafficking, prisonlike working conditions and environmental abuse are endemic.</p> <p>About 400 Vietnamese work in Zrenjanin, along with hundreds more Chinese, who get higher salaries and better living conditions, according to the workers and local labor activists. The former farmer from Vietnam described his work conditions in Serbia as “miserable and dangerous,” and said he was housed in a decrepit shack crammed with other Vietnamese workers and bullied by Chinese supervisors.</p> <p>The Ling Long Tire project first took shape in September 2018 during meetings in Beijing between Serbia's populist president, Aleksandar Vucic, and Xi Jinping, China's leader.</p> <p>Mr. Xi, who has looked to Serbia as China's most dependable European friend at a time when other nations are souring on his country, praised the Balkan nation as a “good, honest friend and good partner.”</p> <p>Mr. Vucic predicted that the tire factory, which plans to produce more than 130 million tires a year in Zrenjanin, and other planned ventures would make Serbia “the port for Chinese investments throughout the region.”</p> <p>Serbia says Chinese investment has helped it achieve economic growth of over 7 percent last year, among the highest in Europe.</p> <p>But the furor over working conditions has set back Serbia's yearslong effort to join the European Union, whose view of China has become increasingly jaundiced. The European Parliament last month <a href="#">demanded an investigation</a> into treatment of Vietnamese laborers in Zrenjanin and voiced alarm “over China's increasing influence in Serbia and across the Western Balkans.”</p>



It has also aggravated what has become Mr. Vucic's biggest political headache: public anger over damage to the environment widely blamed on the government's drive to juice the economy at all costs. Tens of thousands of people gathered late last year for weeks of street protests across Serbia against the development of a lithium mine project by the Anglo-Australian company Rio Tinto. The protests forced a rare retreat by the government, which on Jan. 20 canceled licenses for the project.

Chinese ventures in Serbia, which include a smoke-belching steel works near Belgrade, the capital, and a [copper mine and smelter in the southern town of Bor](#), have helped stoke this anger. Despite gushing praise of Beijing in the pro-government Serbian media, they have made China synonymous in the minds of many Serbs with environmental degradation.

But unlike Rio Tinto, highly vulnerable because of its links to Australia, a country widely reviled in Serbia after the recent expulsion of the tennis star Novak Djokovic, Chinese companies have enjoyed unwavering support from Mr. Vucic as indispensable for the creation of jobs and economic growth.

But Marina Tepic, a leader of the main opposition party, said in an interview that the tire factory would "provide a few jobs to Serbs but kill many more with its pollution."

Strong support from the leaders of both Serbia and China, she added, has put the project largely off limits for government regulators and allowed construction workers there — deprived for a time of their passports, housed in squalor and fearful of retribution — to be kept in "modern slavery."

The government denies protecting the Chinese project from scrutiny, with the construction minister, Tomislav Momirovic, declaring on a recent visit to Zrenjanin that the Chinese factory was Serbia's most closely monitored building site. Officials say that Vietnamese workers have all been given their passports back and are now free to leave if they want.

A few of the workers have fled. But for most of them, leaving would mean breaking their contracts and leaving family members in Vietnam in hock to labor brokers and loan sharks who paid their way to Serbia, the workers say.

A statement from Ling Long Tire cited in Serbian media said the company was "committed to full respect for and a humane and dignified approach to all employees." Yet it stressed that none of the construction workers are employees, and work for subcontractors. Ling Long said it had asked the contractors to provide better accommodations. The tire company did not immediately respond to requests for comment at its head office in China.

The Serbian government, which granted 240 acres of farmland free of charge to Ling Long Tire for its factory and pledged \$85 million in state subsidies, says the factory will eventually generate 1,200 jobs. It declared the venture a "project of national importance," a classification that critics see as a move to shield the venture from environmental and other inspectors.

"They behave as if the Chinese factory were a military site," said Ivan Zivkov, a member of a network of activist groups in Zrenjanin that has been pressing the authorities, mostly unsuccessfully, to release information about the factory and its likely impact on the environment.

Zoran Dedic, a retiree in Zrenjanin who attended a recent public meeting hosted by Mr. Zivkov, said he did not object to foreign investment. But he expressed alarm that so much information about the Chinese tire factory, particularly future levels of pollution, had not been made public and that Ling Long, while donating money to send local children to soccer camp, had not engaged in serious discussion with residents.

"We know nothing about what is going on over there," he said.



Marija Andjelkovic, the head of Astra, an independent group in Belgrade that monitors and lobbies against human trafficking, said she visited the construction site late last year and found Vietnamese workers sleeping in hovels without heat or clean water. “It was like a prison camp,” she said.

Labor contracts signed by Vietnamese workers with China Energy Engineering Group, a Ling Long subcontractor overseeing construction, commit each worker not to engage in trade union activities, and to “refrain from anything that would detract from his reputation or the reputation” of the Chinese company.

Even more restrictive are the terms set by recruitment agencies in Vietnam. One agency, Song Hy Gia Lai International, demanded that all workers going to Europe sign a document pledging never to go on strike or protest.

The document appears to have been copied and pasted from agreements originally drafted for laborers recruited in Vietnam for work in the Middle East: It warns that workers going to Serbia risk having their hands cut off if they steal.

Danilo Curkic, program director for A11, a Belgrade research group, said contracts signed by Vietnamese workers were “far away from anything that is legal under Serbian law” and left them in indentured servitude. “It is impossible that Serbian state authorities did not know what was happening,” he said.

One Vietnamese worker who spoke to a Serbian TV station in November about what he described as inhumane living conditions was taken in for questioning by the Serbian police — and released after signing a statement asserting that he had no complaints. Another who spoke to a Serbian media outlet was fired.

“This is all part of the process of intimidation,” Mr. Curkic said.

Vietnamese workers who agreed to be interviewed by The Times through an interpreter said they had lived for months in squalid barracklike shelters previously used by a local farm to raise pigs and chickens.

The former farmer from northern Vietnam said conditions had improved somewhat in recent weeks. Many workers now live in a two-story concrete block surrounded by a metal fence and watched over by Serbian security guards who bar entry to outsiders.

One resident, a 40-year-old Vietnamese construction worker who requested anonymity, said he shared a tiny room with seven others and that their kitchen was crawling with rats. Salaries of about \$900 per month, higher than what he could earn in Vietnam, were often paid late and slashed for days not worked because of sickness or inclement weather, he said.

He previously worked for different Chinese companies for 15 years in Korea, Kuwait, Malaysia and Taiwan, but said he had never endured conditions as bad as at the Ling Long Tire construction site in Serbia.

“It’s like hell on Earth here,” he said.

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HEADLINE	01/22 How omicron differs from other variants
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/01/22/science/charting-omicron-infection.html?action=click&amp;module=RelatedLinks&amp;pgtype=Article">https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/01/22/science/charting-omicron-infection.html?action=click&amp;module=RelatedLinks&amp;pgtype=Article</a>
GIST	<p>In less than two months, the Omicron variant of the coronavirus has <a href="#">spread around the globe</a> and caused a <a href="#">staggering number of new infections</a>.</p> <p>Omicron now accounts for more than 99.5 percent of new infections in the United States, <a href="#">according to estimates</a> from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The nation reported as many as <a href="#">800,000 new cases a day</a> in mid-January, more than three times as many as at any previous point in the pandemic.</p>

Scientists have been working overtime to study Omicron. Many questions remain unanswered, but here's what they've learned so far.

### **Infection and Incubation**

Omicron moves *fast*. It spreads swiftly through populations, and infections develop quickly in individuals. The time that elapses between when someone is first exposed to the virus and when they develop symptoms is known as the incubation period.

Research suggests that the original version of the coronavirus and early variants had an incubation period of about five days, on average. The Delta variant seems to move faster, with an average incubation period of about four days. Omicron is swifter still, with an incubation period of roughly three days, [according to a recent C.D.C. study](#).

### **Viral Load**

The amount of virus that builds up in someone's body is known as viral load. In general, people are thought to be most infectious when their viral loads are high.

[In a recent study](#) of the Alpha and Delta variants, researchers found that people tended to reach their peak viral loads about three days after infection and clear the virus about six days after that, on average.

Whether Omicron follows the same pattern remains to be seen. In [one preliminary study](#), researchers found that Omicron infections were about a day shorter than Delta infections and resulted in slightly lower peak viral loads, on average. But the difference might be due to higher rates of pre-existing immunity — as a result of vaccination or prior infection — among the people who were infected with Omicron. Another research team found that among vaccinated people with breakthrough infections, Omicron and Delta produced [similar levels of infectious virus](#).

Other data suggest that Omicron may not act like previous variants. Animal and laboratory studies indicate that it [may not be as good](#) at infecting the lungs as Delta, but that it may replicate more quickly in [the upper respiratory tract](#).

The variant may have other unique characteristics, too. One small study found that antibodies produced after an Omicron infection seem to [protect against Delta](#), but Delta infections offer little protection against Omicron. If the finding holds up, it means that Delta may soon have trouble finding hospitable hosts — and that Omicron is likely to replace Delta rather than co-exist with it.

### **Severity**

Omicron appears to cause less severe disease than Delta. In [one recent study](#), researchers found that people with Omicron infections were less likely to be hospitalized, end up in the I.C.U. or require mechanical ventilation than those with Delta infections.

One possible explanation is that Omicron is less likely to damage the lungs than previous variants. A variant that proliferates primarily in the upper respiratory tract may cause less severe disease in most people. One indication of reduced severity is that unvaccinated people seem less likely to be hospitalized with Omicron than with Delta.

But Omicron's apparent mildness may also stem from the fact that it is infecting far more vaccinated people than Delta did. Omicron is skilled at evading the antibodies produced after vaccination, which is leading to more [breakthrough infections](#), but vaccinated people are still protected from the most severe disease. Booster shots of mRNA vaccines are [90 percent effective](#) against hospitalization with Omicron, according to the C.D.C.

Still, doctors cautioned, although the variant may be milder on average, some patients, especially those who are unvaccinated or have compromised immune systems, may become severely ill from Omicron infections. And it's too early to know whether breakthrough cases of Omicron might result in [long Covid](#).

## Testing

Because Omicron replicates so fast and the incubation period is so short, there is a narrower window in which to catch infections before people begin to transmit the virus.

Earlier in the pandemic, people were advised to use a rapid test five to seven days after a potential exposure to the virus. Given Omicron's shorter incubation period, many experts now recommend taking a rapid test two to four days after a potential exposure. (They also recommend taking at least two rapid tests, about a day apart, in order to increase the odds of detecting an infection.)

People who are testing to reduce the risk of transmitting the virus to others, for example at an upcoming gathering, should test as close as possible to the event itself, experts said.

There is still debate over whether [rapid antigen tests might be less sensitive](#) to Omicron than other variants. P.C.R. tests are [more sensitive](#) than rapid tests, which means they are likely to detect the virus earlier in the course of infection, but they take longer to return results.

## New Isolation Rules

The C.D.C. recently [loosened its isolation guidelines](#) for people who are infected with the virus. Previously, the agency recommended that people who test positive for the virus remain isolated for 10 days.

The [new guidelines](#) say that infected people can leave isolation after five days if they are asymptomatic or their symptoms are resolving and they are fever-free. People should wear well-fitting masks for an additional five days when around other people.

The agency said [these changes were prompted](#) by data suggesting that transmission of the virus is most likely in the day or two before symptoms appear and the two or three days after.

But scientists have noted that some people may be infectious for longer than that, and [some criticized the agency](#) for not recommending that people receive a negative result on a rapid test before ending their isolation periods.

The agency subsequently updated its guidelines to note that people who wanted to test should take a rapid antigen test "towards the end" of the five-day isolation period but stopped short of formally recommending it.

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HEADLINE	01/22 Brazil endures spike omicron cases, deaths
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/22/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests?action=click&amp;pgtype=Article&amp;module=&amp;state=default&amp;region=footer&amp;context=breakout link back to briefing#rio-and-sao-paulo-are-postponing-their-carnival-parades-amid-an-omicron-surge">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/22/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests?action=click&amp;pgtype=Article&amp;module=&amp;state=default&amp;region=footer&amp;context=breakout link back to briefing#rio-and-sao-paulo-are-postponing-their-carnival-parades-amid-an-omicron-surge</a>
GIST	<p>The cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo are pushing back their Carnival parades to the end of April, as Brazil endures a spike in coronavirus cases and deaths linked to the Omicron variant.</p> <p>The world-renowned festivities were scheduled to begin on Feb. 25, but the cities' health agencies <a href="#">said in a joint statement on Friday</a> that they would postpone the parades until April 21, predicting "safer" conditions at that point.</p> <p>Brazil was reporting an average of 119,030 cases per day in the past week, a 426 percent increase from the average two weeks ago, according to <a href="#">a New York Times tracker</a>. Deaths also increased 271 percent from two weeks ago, according to the data.</p>

	<p>The state of Rio de Janeiro, which includes the city, has reported an average of 19,093 cases in the last week, up almost 500 percent from two weeks ago. The state of São Paulo has reported far fewer cases — an average of 6,832 in the past week — but still a 324 percent increase in positive tests, the data shows.</p> <p>Rio’s mayor, Eduardo Paes, <a href="#">announced earlier this month that the city’s street parties would be canceled</a> but that the official parade, in which samba groups put on elaborately choreographed shows, would continue with health precautions.</p> <p>Rio canceled both the parade and the street parties in 2021, when Brazil’s death toll was surging amid a slow vaccination rollout. Seventy percent of the country’s population is now fully vaccinated, according to The Times’s tracker.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 Northeast glimmer of hope, West feels brunt</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/22/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests?action=click&amp;pgtype=Article&amp;module=&amp;state=default&amp;region=footer&amp;context=breakout">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/22/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests?action=click&amp;pgtype=Article&amp;module=&amp;state=default&amp;region=footer&amp;context=breakout</a> <a href="#">link back to briefing#as-new-york-reports-glimmers-of-hope-states-in-the-west-are-under-pressure</a>
GIST	<p>As New York and some of its neighbors in the Northeast continued to see signs of hope in declining case numbers and positivity rates this week, states on the West Coast were reporting some of their worst caseloads since the pandemic began.</p> <p>In New York, Gov. Kathy Hochul emphasized that the state’s positivity rate had fallen below 10 percent for the first time in weeks. Of the 299,580 tests recorded on Friday, 9.23 percent turned out to be positive, Governor Hochul announced on Saturday. That was slightly lower than the 9.75 percent rate recorded on Thursday — <a href="#">the first time</a> the state had reached a single-digit positivity rate since Dec. 20.</p> <p>“This is extraordinary progress,” the governor <a href="#">said in a statement</a>, urging New Yorkers yet again to wear masks and get vaccinated.</p> <p>New Jersey was reporting an average of 12,482 daily cases as of Friday, a 60 percent decline from the average two weeks earlier, <a href="#">according to a New York Times tracker</a>. Washington, D.C., had a similar drop in cases, reporting an average of <a href="#">761 daily cases as of Friday</a>, down 61 percent from two weeks ago.</p> <p>Meanwhile, Western states are feeling the brunt of the fast-spreading Omicron variant, with places like Utah reporting the highest <a href="#">levels of cases and hospitalizations</a> it has seen in the pandemic.</p> <p>Oregon, as of Friday, reported <a href="#">a 71 percent increase</a> in daily average cases over a two-week period and a 65 percent increase in hospitalizations, according to The Times’s tracker. Earlier this month, Gov. Kate Brown of Oregon <a href="#">said she would be deploying</a> up to 500 National Guard members to help strained hospitals with the soaring caseload.</p> <p>California reported a 72 percent increase in daily average cases over the past two weeks, and a 70 percent increase in hospitalizations. Masks continue to be mandated indoors by state officials, and Gov. Gavin Newsom has also called on the National Guard in his state. Earlier this month, he said that more than 200 National Guard members would be <a href="#">deployed across 50 sites to help meet demand for testing</a>. He said they would assist with crowd control and provide clinical care in places with staffing shortages.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 New Zealand sets highest level restrictions</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/22/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests?action=click&amp;pgtype=Article&amp;module=&amp;state=default&amp;region=footer&amp;context=breakout">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/22/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests?action=click&amp;pgtype=Article&amp;module=&amp;state=default&amp;region=footer&amp;context=breakout</a> <a href="#">link back to briefing#with-omicron-circulating-new-zealand-imposes-its-toughest-restrictions</a>
GIST	New Zealand announced on Sunday that it would impose its highest level of Covid restrictions across the country at midnight, after at least nine cases of the highly transmissible Omicron variant were reported.

The cases, in the South Island town of Nelson, are the first Omicron infections detected outside of workers connected to the international airport or the country's hotel quarantine facilities. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said some of the infected people had attended a large wedding in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city.

"That means Omicron is now circulating in Auckland and possibly the Nelson-Marlborough region, if not elsewhere," Ms. Ardern said at a news conference announcing the restrictions.

New Zealand was pursuing a zero-Covid strategy until last year, when a major outbreak of the Delta variant forced it to give up those aspirations. But its numbers have remained low. Over the last two months, New Zealand has reported just a few dozen new cases per day.

It was unclear how the people in Nelson — members of a single, multigenerational family — had contracted the virus, though Ms. Ardern said they had recently flown on the same Air New Zealand flight as an air steward who later tested positive with Omicron.

Ms. Ardern said the new measures, classified as "Red" under the country's traffic-light-based system, were "not lockdown."

"At Red, businesses stay open and you can do most of things that you normally do, including visiting family and friends and traveling around the country," she said.

But people who are not vaccinated will face significant restrictions, including being barred from worship services and from businesses that serve food or drinks. Schools will stay open, but all pupils from third grade up must wear masks. Events like weddings and funerals will be limited to 100 people, all of whom must be vaccinated. (If unvaccinated people attend, the limit is reduced to 25.)

More than 93 percent of New Zealand's population aged 12 and up are considered fully vaccinated against the coronavirus, but only 23 percent have received a booster shot. The new restrictions are expected to be kept in place for a number of weeks as more booster shots are distributed.

On Friday, New Zealand announced that people who test positive for the virus would need to isolate for 14 days, up from 10. Their close contacts must now isolate for 10 days, instead of a week.

The Omicron variant has brought the pandemic to some of the most remote regions of the world this week. Some island nations in the Pacific recorded their first cases, prompting the first lockdowns of the pandemic in Kiribati and Samoa.

At the news conference, Ms. Ardern said that her wedding to her partner, the television host Clarke Gayford, would not be held in the coming weeks as planned.

"I am no different to, dare I say it, thousands of other New Zealanders who have had much more devastating impacts from the pandemic," she said of the postponement. "The most gutting of which is the inability to be with a loved one when they are gravely ill — that will far, far outstrip any sadness I experience."

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HEADLINE	01/22 Olympic torch relay shrinks for safety
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/22/world/olympic-torch-relay-covid-safety.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/22/world/olympic-torch-relay-covid-safety.html</a>
GIST	<p>The Olympic torch's public journey to the opening ceremony of the Winter Games will be much more lonely and with much less fanfare.</p> <p>The torch relay, usually global and lasting for months, will be just three days, mostly local, and open only to select members of the public, according to organizers of the Beijing Olympics.</p>

“This torch relay will always prioritize safety,” Yang Haibin, an official from the organizing committee, said at a news briefing on Friday.

The route will feature stops at the Great Wall, the Summer Palace, and the Olympic Village in Beijing. The relay is scheduled to start Feb. 2 and finish on Feb. 4, when the Games begin.

Vaccinations are required for the torchbearers, who will be tested for coronavirus and are having have their health closely monitored until the torch relay begins.

China is going [to extreme lengths](#) to curb outbreaks that have proliferated around the country this month. At least 30 major cities have reported locally transmitted Covid cases, and many more cities have been subjected to partial lockdowns and mass testing.

The case numbers are only a few, though, with 24 locally transmitted cases in Beijing recently. Several neighborhoods there have been sealed off, and the government is increasing testing requirements for entering and leaving the capital. Officials said this week that [Olympics tickets would not be sold to the public](#) because of concerns about the virus.

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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Lament: last Christians in Syrian city</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/23/world/middleeast/syria-christians-idlib.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/23/world/middleeast/syria-christians-idlib.html</a>
GIST	<p>On Christmas Day, Michel Butros al-Jisri, one of the last Christians in the Syrian city of Idlib, didn't attend services, because the Islamist rebels who control the area had long since locked up the church. Nor did he gather with friends and relatives to celebrate around a tree because nearly all of his fellow Christians have either died or fled during <a href="#">Syria's 10-year civil war</a>.</p> <p>Instead, Mr. al-Jisri said, he went to the city's Christian cemetery, which no one uses anymore, to sit among the graves of his forebears and mark the day quietly, by himself.</p> <p>“Who am I going to celebrate the holiday with? The walls?” he asked. “I don't want to celebrate if I am alone.”</p> <p>Mr. al-Jisri, who is 90, stooped and almost deaf but still fairly robust, is a living relic of one of the many formerly vibrant Christian communities in the Middle East that appear headed for extinction.</p> <p>Communities across the Middle East and North Africa — some of which trace their roots to Christianity's early days — have been struggling for decades with wars, poverty and persecution. A British government report in 2019 found that Christians in the <a href="#">Middle East and North Africa</a> had fallen to less than 4 percent of the population from more than 20 percent a century ago.</p> <p>The past decade has been particularly brutal as the upheavals have left Christians in parts of Iraq, Syria and beyond under the control of Islamist militants. They were subject to the whims of their new rulers, who banned their religious practices, <a href="#">seized their properties</a> and even <a href="#">singled them out for death</a> at times.</p> <p>Over nine decades, Mr. al-Jisri went from being a member of a Christian community in Idlib that blended easily into the city's social fabric to one of only three known Christians who remain there.</p> <p>He was born in 1931 in Idlib, a city surrounded by olive groves and farmland in northwestern Syria, one of four children, he said. His mother died when he was 2 months old, and his father soon remarried and had two more sons.</p> <p>Although Idlib's Christians did not rival the numbers in major cities like <a href="#">Aleppo</a>, whose Christian population also <a href="#">dropped during the war</a>, there was a small, vibrant community in the provincial capital and nearby villages, living alongside the area's Muslim majority with little friction.</p>



Mr. al-Jisri's family was Greek Orthodox, like most of Idlib's Christians, and worshiped at St. Mary's Orthodox Church, a stone chapel with a bell tower and rich in icons, built in 1886 near the city center. A National Evangelical Church was built around the corner years later.

Members of his community worked as jewelers, doctors, lawyers and merchants, and even sold alcohol, though it was religiously forbidden, to their Muslim neighbors.

On Easter and Christmas, the priest opened his home to Muslim and Christian well-wishers, according to Fayez Qawsara, a historian from the area. A huge Christmas tree in a square near the church drew crowds of Muslim and Christian children who came to receive gifts, said Father Ibrahim Farah, Mr. al-Jisri's former priest.

For many decades, Mr. al-Jisri worked for the church as the cemetery caretaker, keeping it clean, mending fences and organizing funerals. He would receive the grieving families and make coffee for those paying their respects.

Syria has been ruled for more than 50 years by the al-Assad family, and under both Hafez, who died in 1990, and his son, Bashar, who has been Syria's president since, violence between religious communities was rare.

But that system, and the life that Mr. al-Jisri had long known, fell apart after Syria's civil war began in 2011, shaking the government's hold on large swaths of territory.

In 2015, Islamist rebels stormed the city of Idlib. As they took control, they killed a Christian man, Elias al-Khal, and his son, Najib, who sold alcohol, Mr. al-Jisri said.

Soon after, they kidnapped Father Ibrahim and held him for 19 days, the priest said. By the time he was released, the church library and archive had been pillaged, and most of the about 1,200 Christians who had remained in the city until the rebels arrived had already fled or were on their way out.

"News spreads easily," Mr. al-Jisri said. "They put their families in cars and drove away."

The city's new rulers closed the church and banned public displays of Christian devotion, further fueling the exodus. Once the Christians were gone, the rebels took over their homes and shops.

"We used to see Idlib as a nice mosaic," Father Ibrahim said by telephone from Toronto, where he moved after fleeing Syria. "Now, it is a complete mess."

Christians were about 10 percent of Syria's population of 21 million before the war began in 2011. Now, they account for about 5 percent, with fewer than 700,000 left, according to groups that track the persecution of Christians around the world.

With the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Christians began to leave that country in droves as well, and their population had shrunk to less than 500,000 by 2015 from as many as 1.5 million in 2003.

The flight of Christians from Idlib was particularly extreme, and by the end of 2015, Father Ibrahim said, only five Christians were left.

Two have since died.

One of those remaining is a woman who prefers to keep her life private. Another, Nabil Razzouq, 72, is a retired widower whose four adult children live elsewhere in Syria or abroad. He said he had chosen to stay in Idlib because the war had stolen Syrians' time and he did not want to lose his home as well.

"If I lost time and place, I would go insane," he said. "That's why I held onto the place."



Idlib is the last province in Syria still mostly controlled by rebels, and more than a third of the 4.4 million people in the country's northwest fled there during the war or were bused there by the government after it conquered their towns.

Mr. al-Jisri said that he had not entered the church, helped with a funeral or had a drink of alcohol since before the rebels took over.

"Now, there's no one," he said.

Members of his former congregation still pay him an honorary salary, which puts food on his table. He lives in a one-room house where a single gas burner serves as the kitchen, cushions on the floor are the living room and his bedroom is a mattress pushed against the wall.

He has a heater, but can't get fuel. He has a television and a radio but no electricity.

Above the cupboard where he keeps his teacups hang fading photographs of dead relatives, crucifixes and icons of Jesus and Mary.

When guests drop by, he serves them tea or coffee in his small dirt courtyard, where the call to prayer from a nearby mosque rings out through the day.

"We are living, thank God," he said. "We don't owe anyone anything and no one owes us anything."

Mr. al-Jisri never married, and all but one of his siblings have died, he said. He thinks his surviving brother lives in the United States, but they are not in touch.

He has nieces and nephews whom he would love to visit in Aleppo, about an hour's drive away in normal times. But he hasn't made the trip in years, because it would require crossing a hostile front line between rebel and government forces.

So he spends his days wandering the city market, chatting with neighbors or dropping in on friends — or on the children of friends who have died.

It doesn't bother him that they are all Muslims.

"We are all brothers," he said.

Some days, he walks to the cemetery where he worked for so many years, just to check on it. Once busy with families coming and going, it is now deserted, and he sometimes sits for hours, alone with the gravestones.

But despite the collapse of his community, he said he had never considered leaving Syria.

"Why should I?" he said. "I have friends that I love a lot, nobody is bothering me and I'm not bothering anyone."

The churches in Idlib are still closed, even though the Islamist group that controls the area, as part of its efforts to play down its more extremist past, has allowed Christians in nearby villages to resume services in their churches.

But that has not persuaded Mr. al-Jisri's congregation to return.

"I wish they'd come back," he said.

His closest friends are the pet pigeons he keeps in a room attached to his house. As they flutter around him in the courtyard cooing, he flings birdseed and sings to himself [old Arabic songs](#) about love and a country that has not always loved him back:

*O treasure of the Levant, your love is on my mind,  
The sweetest time, I spent with you,  
You said goodbye and promised me,  
Don't forget me, I won't forget you,  
No matter how many years and nights you are gone.*

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HEADLINE	01/22 Inflation debate: pandemic or policy?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/22/business/economy/inflation-biden-pandemic.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=Business">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/22/business/economy/inflation-biden-pandemic.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=Business</a>
GIST	<p>The price increases bedeviling consumers, businesses and policymakers worldwide have prompted a heated debate in Washington about how much of today's rapid inflation is a result of policy choices in the United States and how much stems from global factors tied to the pandemic, like snarled supply chains.</p> <p>At a moment when stubbornly rapid price gains are weighing on consumer confidence and creating a political liability for President Biden, White House officials have repeatedly blamed international forces for high inflation, including factory shutdowns in Asia and overtaxed shipping routes that are causing shortages and pushing up prices everywhere. The officials increasingly cite high inflation in places including the euro area, where prices are climbing at the fastest pace on record, as a sign that the world is experiencing a shared moment of price pain, deflecting the blame away from U.S. policy.</p> <p>But a chorus of economists point to government policies as a big part of the reason U.S. inflation is at a 40-year high. While they agree that prices are rising as a result of shutdowns and supply chain woes, they say that America's decision to flood the economy with stimulus money helped to send consumer spending into overdrive, exacerbating those global trends.</p> <p>The world's trade machine is producing, shipping and delivering more goods to American consumers than it ever has, as people flush with cash buy couches, cars and home office equipment, but supply chains just haven't been able to keep up with that supercharged demand.</p> <p>Kristin J. Forbes, an economist at the Massachusetts Institute for Technology, said that "more than half of the increase, at least, is due to global factors." But "there is also a domestic demand component that is important," she said.</p> <p>The White House has tried to address inflation by boosting supply — announcing measures to unclog ports and trying to ramp up domestic manufacturing, all of which take time. But rising inflation has already imperiled Mr. Biden's ability to pass a sprawling social policy and climate bill over fears that more spending could add to inflation. Senator Joe Manchin III, the West Virginia Democrat whose vote is critical to getting the legislation passed, has cited rising prices as one reason he won't support the bill.</p> <p>The demand side of today's price increases may prove easier for policymakers to address. The Federal Reserve is preparing to raise interest rates to make borrowing more expensive, slowing spending down, in a recipe that could help to tame inflation. Fading government help for households may also naturally bring down demand and soften price pressures.</p> <p>Inflation has accelerated sharply in the United States, with the Consumer Price Index climbing <a href="#">by 7 percent in the year through December</a>, its fastest pace since 1982. But in recent months, it has also moved up sharply across many countries, a fact administration officials have emphasized.</p> <p>"The inflation has everything to do with the supply chain," President Biden said during a news conference on Wednesday. "While there are differences country by country, this is a global phenomenon and driven</p>

by these global issues,” Jen Psaki, the White House press secretary, said after the [latest inflation data were released](#).

It is the case that supply disruptions are leading to higher inflation in many places, including in large developing economies like India and Brazil and in developed ones like [the euro area](#). Data released in [the United Kingdom](#) and [in Canada](#) on Wednesday showed prices accelerating at their fastest rate in 30 years in both countries. Inflation in the eurozone, which is measured differently from how the U.S. calculates it, [climbed to an annual rate of 5 percent](#) in December, according to an initial estimate by the European Union statistics office.

“The U.S. is hardly an island amidst this storm of supply disruptions and rising demand, especially for goods and commodities,” said Eswar Prasad, a professor of trade policy at Cornell University and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

But some economists point out that even as inflation proves pervasive around the globe, it has been more pronounced in America than elsewhere.

“The United States has had much more inflation than almost any other advanced economy in the world,” said Jason Furman, an economist at Harvard University and former Obama administration economic adviser, who used comparable methodologies to look across areas and concluded that [U.S. price increases have been consistently faster](#).

The difference, he said, comes because “the United States’ stimulus is in a category of its own.”

White House officials have argued that differences in “core” inflation — which excludes food and fuel — have been small between the United States and other major economies over the past six months. And the gaps all but disappear if you strip out car prices, which are up sharply and have a bigger impact in the United States, where consumers buy more automobiles. (Mr. Furman argued that people who didn’t buy cars would have spent their money on something else and that simply eliminating them from the U.S. consumption basket is not fair.)

Administration officials have also noted that the United States has seen a robust rebound in economic growth. The International Monetary Fund said in October that it expected U.S. output to climb by 6 percent in 2021 and 5.2 percent in 2022, compared with 5 percent growth last year in the euro area and 4.3 percent growth projected for this year.

“To the extent that we got more heat, we got a lot more growth for it,” said Jared Bernstein, a member of the White House Council of Economic Advisers.

While many nations spent heavily to protect their economies from coronavirus fallout — in some places enough to push up demand, and potentially inflation — the United States approved about [\\$5 trillion](#) in spending in 2020 and 2021. That outstripped the response in other major economies as a share of the nation’s output, according to [data compiled by the International Monetary Fund](#).

Many economists supported protecting workers and businesses early in the pandemic, but some took issue with the size of the \$1.9 trillion package last March under the Biden administration. They argued that sending households another round of stimulus, including \$1,400 checks, further fueled demand when the economy was already healing.

Consumer spending seemed to react: [Retail sales](#), for instance, jumped after the checks went out.

Adam Posen, president of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, said the U.S. government spent too much in too short a time in the first half of 2021.

“If there had not been the bottlenecks and labor market shortages, it might not have mattered as much. But it did,” he said.

Americans found themselves with a lot of money in the bank, and as they spent that money on goods, demand collided with a global supply chain that was too fragile to catch up.

Virus outbreaks shut down factories, ports faced backlogs and a dearth of truckers roiled transit routes. Americans still [managed to buy more goods](#) than ever before in 2021, and foreign factories [sent a record sum of products](#) to U.S. shops and doorsteps. But all that shopping wasn't enough to satisfy consumer demand.

The Port of Los Angeles is a window into the mismatch. The port had its busiest calendar year on record last year, processing 16 percent more containers than in 2020. Even so, it still has a huge backlog of ships waiting to dock, several of which, as of Friday, have been waiting a month or more.

The extra help the government provided to families last year mattered to inflation because of those bottlenecks, economists said. Giving households more money to buy camping equipment or a new kitchen table widened the gap between what consumers wanted and what companies could actually supply.

As goods came into short supply and began to cost more to transport, businesses raised their prices.

Government checks haven't been alone in driving strong U.S. demand. As virus fears prevent consumers from planning a trip to Paris or a fancy restaurant dinner, many have turned to refurbishing the living room instead, making goods an unusually hot commodity. Lockdowns that forced families to abruptly [stop spending](#) at the start of the pandemic helped to swell savings stockpiles.

And the Federal Reserve's interest rates are at rock bottom, which has bolstered demand for big purchases made on credit, from houses and cars to business investments like machinery and computers. Families have been [taking on more housing and auto debt](#), data from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York shows, helping to pump up those sectors.

But if stimulus-driven demand is fueling inflation, the diagnosis could come with a silver lining. It may be easier to temper consumer spending than to rapidly reorient tangled supply lines.

People may naturally begin to buy less as government help fades. Spending could shift away from goods and back toward services if the pandemic abates. And the Fed's policies work on demand — not supply.

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HEADLINE	01/23 For many marchers Jan 6 is the beginning
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/23/us/for-many-who-marched-jan-6-was-only-the-beginning.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/23/us/for-many-who-marched-jan-6-was-only-the-beginning.html</a>
GIST	<p>PHOENIX — There were moments when Paul Davis questioned his decision to join the crowd that marched on the United States Capitol last January. When he was publicly identified and fired from his job as a lawyer. When his fiancée walked out.</p> <p>But then something shifted. Instead of lingering as an indelible stain, Jan. 6 became a galvanizing new beginning for Mr. Davis. He started his own law practice as a “lawyer for patriots” representing anti-vaccine workers. He began attending local conservative meetings around his hometown, Frisco, Texas. As the national horror over the Capitol attack calcified into another fault line of bitter division, Mr. Davis said his status as a Jan. 6 attendee had become “a badge of honor” with fellow conservatives.</p> <p>“It definitely activated me more,” said Mr. Davis, who posted a video of himself in front of a line of police officers outside the Capitol but said he did not enter the building and was expressing his constitutional rights to protest. He has not been charged with any crime from that day. “It gave me street cred.”</p> <p>The post-mortems and prosecutions that followed that infamous day have focused largely on the violent core of the mob. But a larger group has received far less attention: the thousands who traveled to</p>

Washington at the behest of Mr. Trump to protest the results of a democratic election, the vast majority of whom did not set foot in the Capitol and have not been charged with any crime — who simply went home.

For these Donald Trump supporters, the next chapter of Jan. 6 is not the ashes of a disgraced insurrection, but an amorphous new movement fueled by grievances against vaccines and President Biden, and a deepened devotion to his predecessor's lies about a stolen election.

In the year since the attack, many have plunged into new fights and new conspiracy theories sown in the bloody chaos of that day. They have organized efforts to raise money for the people charged in the Capitol attack, casting them as political prisoners. Some are speaking at conservative rallies. Others are running for office.

Interviews with a dozen people who were in the large mass of marchers show that the worst attack on American democracy in generations has mutated into an emblem of resistance. Those interviewed are just a fraction of the thousands who attended the rally, but their reflections present a troubling omen should the country face another close presidential election.

Many Jan. 6 attendees have shifted their focus to what they see as a new, urgent threat: Covid-19 vaccine mandates and what they call efforts by Democratic politicians to control their bodies. They cite Mr. Biden's vaccine mandates as justification for their efforts to block his presidency.

Some bridled at Trump's recent, full-throated endorsements of the vaccine and wondered whether he was still on their side.

"A lot of people in the MAGA Patriot community are like, 'What is up with Trump?'" Mr. Davis, the Texas lawyer, said. "With most of us, the vaccines are anathema."

In interviews, some who attended the Capitol protests gave credence to a new set of falsehoods promoted by Mr. Trump and conservative media figures and politicians that minimize the attack, or blame the violence falsely on left-wing infiltrators. And a few believe the insurrection did not go far enough.

"Most everybody thinks we ought to have went with guns, and I kind of agree with that myself," said Oren Orr, 32, a landscaper from Robbinsville, N.C., who had rented a car with his wife to get to the Capitol last year. "I think we ought to have went armed, and took it back. That is what I believe."

Mr. Orr added that he was not planning to do anything, only pray. Last year, he said he brought a baton and Taser to Washington but did not get them out.

More than a year later, the day may not define their lives, but the sentiment that drove them there has given them new purpose. Despite multiple reviews showing the 2020 elections were run fairly, they are adamant that the voting process is rigged. They feel the news media and Democrats are trying to divide the country.

The ralliers were largely white, conservative men and women who have formed the bedrock of the Trump movement since 2016. Some describe themselves as self-styled patriots, some openly carrying rifles and handguns. Many invoke the name of Jesus and say they believe they are fighting a holy war to preserve a Christian nation.

The people who went to Washington for Jan. 6 are in some ways an isolated cohort. But they are also part of a larger segment of the public that may distance itself from the day's violence but share some of its beliefs. A question now is the extent to which they represent a greater movement.

A national survey led by Robert Pape, the director of the Chicago Project on Security and Threats at the University of Chicago, concluded that about 47 million American adults, or one in every five, agreed with the statement that "the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump and Joe Biden is an illegitimate president." Of those, about 21 million, or 9 percent of American adults, shared the belief that animated

many of those who went beyond marching and invaded the Capitol, Mr. Pape said: that the use of force was justified to restore Mr. Trump to the presidency.

“They are combustible material, like an amount of dry brushwood that could be set off during wildfire season by a lightning strike or by a spark,” he said.

Some downplay Jan. 6 as a largely peaceful expression of their right to protest, comparing the Capitol attack with the 2020 racial-justice protests that erupted after George Floyd’s murder. They complain about a double standard, saying that the news media glossed over arson and looting after those protests but fixated on the violence on Jan. 6.

They have rallied around the 700 people facing criminal charges in connection to the attack, calling them political prisoners.

Earlier this month in Phoenix, a few dozen conservatives met to commemorate the anniversary Jan. 6 as counterprogramming to the solemn ceremonies taking place in Washington. They prayed and sang “Amazing Grace” and broadcast a phone call from the mother of Jacob Chansley, an Arizona man whose painted face and Viking helmet transformed him into an emblem of the riots. Mr. Chansley was sentenced to 41 months in prison after pleading guilty to federal charges.

Then it was Jeff Zink’s turn at the microphone. Mr. Zink is one of several people who attended the Capitol protests and who are running for public office. Some won state legislature seats or local council positions in last November’s elections. Now, others have their eyes on the midterms.

Mr. Zink is making an uphill run for Congress as a Republican in an overwhelmingly Democratic swath of Phoenix and said he will fight for Jan. 6 defendants — a group that includes his 32-year-old son, Ryan.

Father and son marched up the Capitol steps together and were steps away as police subdued a man who smashed a window. Mr. Zink said he and Ryan were peacefully documenting the event, and never actually entered the building. A federal criminal complaint accuses Ryan Zink of unlawfully entering a restricted area of the Capitol and obstructing an official proceeding.

The complaint against Ryan Zink quotes a Facebook message from Jan. 6: “Broke down the doors pushed Congress out of session I took two flash bangs I’m OK I’ll be posting pictures in a little bit when we get back I’m hurt but we accomplished the job.”

Mr. Zink, a onetime church deacon, referenced the biblical Book of Proverbs as he outlined why he believed Covid-19 was a bioweapon meant to convert the United States to socialism, and lamented that the United States “was no longer a Christian nation.” And despite the fallout from their decision to join the Jan. 6 rally, Mr. Zink said he would “absolutely” do it again.

“Godly men and godly women need to stand up,” he said.

Julie McKechnie Fisher, who went to Washington to hear Mr. Trump speak on Jan. 6 last year, helped organize more than 30 candlelight vigils nationwide like the one where Mr. Zink spoke, to honor the defendants. She is working with a right-wing group called Look Ahead America, which aims to register new voters in states like Virginia and Pennsylvania, and train them to lobby for what the group’s website calls “America First initiatives,” like changing election laws and “helping to clean up voter rolls.”

“We just can’t become complacent,” she said. “I can’t see anything good that this administration has done for us, and it doesn’t feel like he loves our country.”

Several people who marched on the Capitol described the day as a kind of Trumpian Fort Sumter — part of a life-or-death fight against socialism, anti-Christian secularism and the tyranny of President Biden’s masking and vaccine mandates.

Their views began to take shape in the hours just after Jan. 6, and have been buttressed by a flood of misinformation on social media, talk radio and from revisionist documentaries. Some said they had watched a program by the Fox News host Tucker Carlson that floated conspiracy theories suggesting Jan. 6 was a “false flag” operation.

Several people charged in the breach of the Capitol have expressed remorse as they pleaded guilty and made requests for sentencing leniency, telling federal judges they now feel duped or wish they could do it over. A Colorado man wrote that he was “guilty of being an idiot.” A Kansas City man said he was “ashamed.”

Still, those who have been charged have supporters whose movement is wrapped not only in feelings of anger, but also of belonging. It is a reason the spirit of that day carries on.

That sense of community resonates for people like Greg Stuchell, a city councilman from Hillsdale, Mich., who took an overnight bus to Washington last year with his teenage daughter to protest the election results. He said he did not enter the Capitol. For him, Jan. 6 is like the annual March for Life in Washington, he said, where people simply show up to protest laws and values they believe should fall. For every one person who attends, there are another hundred who wish they could have too, he said.

Since the election Mr. Stuchell, a Catholic convert who opposes abortion, has channeled his anger by marching with other men around the Hillsdale courthouse on the first Sunday of every month. He found solidarity, he said, in similar men’s groups growing in Hungary and Poland. “Men got to step up, we don’t have that many men any more,” he said. At the machine shop he manages, some male co-workers have been tossing around ideas to protest what they see as a rigged government and election system going forward, like not filling out W2s, or not paying taxes, he said.

“If they don’t fix it, I don’t know what happens,” he said. “People need to stand up and say, ‘Enough.’”

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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 Plot: install pro-Russia leader for Ukraine?</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/22/world/europe/ukraine-russia-coup-britain.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/22/world/europe/ukraine-russia-coup-britain.html</a>
GIST	<p>KYIV — The British government said Saturday that the Kremlin was developing plans to install a pro-Russian leader in Ukraine — and had already chosen a potential candidate — as President Vladimir V. Putin weighs whether to order the Russian forces amassed on Ukraine’s border to attack.</p> <p>The highly unusual public communiqué by the United Kingdom’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office, issued late at night in London, comes at a moment of high-stakes diplomacy between the Kremlin and the West. Russia has deployed more than 100,000 Russian troops on Ukraine’s borders that could, according to American officials, attack at any moment.</p> <p>“The information being released today shines a light on the extent of Russian activity designed to subvert Ukraine, and is an insight into Kremlin thinking,” Liz Truss, Britain’s foreign secretary, said in a statement. “Russia must de-escalate, end its campaigns of aggression and disinformation, and pursue a path of diplomacy.”</p> <p>The British announcement was the second time in just over a week that a Western power had publicly accused Russia of meddling in Ukraine’s internal affairs, part of a concerted effort to pressure Mr. Putin to de-escalate. On Jan. 14, the United States accused the Kremlin of <a href="#">sending saboteurs into eastern Ukraine</a> to create a provocation that could serve as a pretext for invasion.</p> <p>The new accusations from Britain provided few details about how Russia might go about imposing a new government on Ukraine, and the communiqué did not say whether such plans were contingent on an invasion by Russian troops. British officials familiar with the situation, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the intent was both to head off the activation of such plans and to put Mr. Putin on notice that this plot had been exposed.</p>



In Washington, officials said they believe the British intelligence is correct. Two officials said it had been collected by British intelligence services. Within the informal intelligence alliance known as “Five Eyes,” Britain has primary responsibility for intercepting Russian communications, which is why it played a major role in exposing Russian interference in the 2016 elections.

Emily J. Horne, the spokeswoman for the U.S. National Security Council, said in a statement that “this kind of plotting is deeply concerning. The Ukrainian people have the sovereign right to determine their own future, and we stand with our democratically-elected partners in Ukraine.”

But the Russian foreign ministry denied the British accusation.

“The spread of disinformation by the British foreign ministry is one more piece of evidence that NATO countries, led by the Anglo Saxons, are escalating tensions around Ukraine,” it said in a statement. “We call on the British foreign ministry to stop its provocation activities.”

Ukraine is in a state of high anxiety. In recent weeks several reports have emerged about plots and schemes aimed at destabilizing the government and tipping the country into war.

In addition to warnings about Russian plotting from the United States and Britain, Ukraine’s military intelligence agency recently said Russia had sent hundreds of mercenaries into two rebel eastern Ukrainian regions, and last November President Volodymyr Zelensky said Ukrainian intelligence had uncovered a Russian-backed coup plot involving a prominent Ukrainian oligarch.

At a security conference in Kyiv on Saturday, participants, most of them high ranking members of Ukraine’s political opposition, spoke darkly of fifth columnists and enemy collaborators.

“We are not just talking about large-scale aggression by Russia,” said Pavlo Klimkin, a former foreign minister. “We are talking about the wish of Russian officials, including Putin, to destroy Ukraine as such.”

The British communiqué provided no evidence to back up its assertion that Russia was plotting to overthrow the Ukrainian government. The communiqué also named four other Ukrainians, accusing them of maintaining ties to the Russian intelligence services, including Russian intelligence officers involved in the planning for an attack on Ukraine.

Of the five Ukrainians named, four fled Ukraine for Russia in 2014 following a popular uprising that ousted the Russian-backed government in Kyiv and touched off the separatist war in Ukraine’s east that continues today.

According to the British assessment, Russian planners were considering installing a former member of the Ukrainian Parliament named Yevgeniy Murayev as leader of a pro-Kremlin puppet government in Kyiv. Once a member of the Russian-backed Party of Regions, Mr. Murayev is now head of a political party called Nashi, part of a constellation of opposition parties opposed to Ukraine’s pro-Western parties. Last September, a massive banner with his photograph was hung on the facade of Federation of Trade Unions building on Kyiv’s Independence Square with the slogan “This is our Land.”

In a recent Facebook post he accused the current government in Kyiv of selling out to the United States, which he said was whipping up war hysteria to reap financial rewards from the sale of weapons. “The hawks are looking forward to a feast,” he wrote.

It is not clear from the British statement whether Russia had informed Mr. Murayev that he was being considered as a possible future leader of Ukraine. But after a journalist with a British newspaper tipped him off about the revelations, he [posted a photo of himself](#) to Facebook posing as James Bond with the comment, “Details tomorrow.”

Russian spies maintain extensive networks of agents in Ukraine and contacts between Ukrainian officials and intelligence officers are not uncommon, according to Ukrainian and Western security officials.

All four of the other Ukrainians named in the communiqué once held senior positions in the Ukrainian government and worked in proximity to Paul Manafort, former President Donald J. Trump's campaign manager, when he worked as a political adviser to Ukraine's former Russian-backed president, Viktor F. Yanukovich. After Mr. Yanukovich's government fell in 2014, they fled to Russia.

One of those named, Vladimir Sivkovich, was among four Ukrainians targeted last week with [sanctions by the United States Treasury Department](#) for their ties to Russian efforts to destabilize Ukraine.

If the British assessment is accurate, it would not be the first time the Kremlin tried to install a pro-Russian leader or interfere in Ukraine's government. In 2004, Russian efforts to fraudulently sway a presidential election set off what became known as the Orange Revolution, which forced a redo election that led to the defeat of Mr. Yanukovich, who was the Kremlin's favored candidate.

In 2013, when the Kremlin pressured Mr. Yanukovich, who eventually was elected president, to back out of a trade pact with the European Union, Ukrainians again poured into the streets. Mr. Yanukovich was eventually driven from power, prompting Mr. Putin to order the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and instigate a separatist war in eastern Ukraine.

Russian officials have repeatedly denied any intention of launching an attack against Ukraine, dismissing such accusations as "hysteria" and claiming without providing evidence that it is the government in Kyiv that is seeking to escalate tensions. Even so the buildup of Russian troops on the border has continued. At least 127,000 soldiers now surround Ukraine to the north, east and west, Ukraine's military intelligence service says, with additional troops from Russia's Eastern Military District now pouring into neighboring Belarus.

The standoff is redolent of an old-fashioned Cold War showdown between Moscow and the West, with both sides trading accusations of war mongering and jockeying for geopolitical advantage. Though the confrontational tone was muted when Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met his Russian counterpart for the latest round of talks in Geneva on Friday, there is as yet no end in sight.

Britain's unusual disclosure comes at a time when it is trying to assert itself in the crisis on military and diplomatic fronts. It has delivered shipments of antitank weapons to the Ukrainian military, dispatched its senior ministers to NATO countries under threat from Russia and begun to engage directly with Russia.

Britain's defense secretary, Ben Wallace, accepted an invitation from his Russian counterpart, Sergei K. Shoigu, to meet in Moscow, while the foreign secretary, Liz Truss, may meet with Russia's foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov.

The disclosure also comes amid a swirling political scandal over Downing Street garden parties in 2020 that violated lockdown restrictions, which has mushroomed to such a degree that it threatens Prime Minister Boris Johnson's hold on power.

Critics have suggested that Mr. Johnson may try to exploit the tensions with Russia — and Britain's more assertive diplomatic and military role — as a way to deflect attention from his political woes.

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HEADLINE	01/23 Olympians final qualifying event: no Covid
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/23/sports/2022-beijing-covid-coronavirus.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/23/sports/2022-beijing-covid-coronavirus.html</a>
GIST	<p>They've come too far, for far too long, to mess it all up now.</p> <p>And so the eight members of the Canadian men's curling team are spending the three weeks before the Winter Olympics sequestered in a rental home in Vancouver. They train only when the rink nearby is</p>

empty and otherwise pass the time shooting pool, sitting in a hot tub and thinking about their families back home.

“It’s like a frat house without the booze,” said Marc Kennedy, a 2010 gold medalist and an alternate on this year’s team, who is dealing with the disappointment of missing one of his daughters’ dance recitals. “Everybody here has pretty wonderful spouses.”

As thousands of Olympians worldwide collectively hurtle through the final weeks of preparation for the 2022 Games in Beijing, they are integrating a new exercise into their daily regimens:

Sidestepping Covid-19, by whatever means necessary.

With the Feb. 4 opening ceremony in their sights, athletes are cutting off contact with loved ones, changing the very ways they train and, in many cases, ceasing all activities outside the realms of competition. The task has felt increasingly herculean amid a global surge in coronavirus cases inflamed by the highly contagious Omicron variant.

The emotional toll of all this, of living in fear of getting sick, of thoroughly disrupting their lives to avoid it, has been as taxing as their hardest workouts. But the alternative — contracting the coronavirus, being forced to sit out the Games and, in effect, erasing years of preparation and anticipation for this singular moment in their careers — is simply too devastating to ponder.

“Everyone is testing positive right now, and that freaks me out,” said Emily Sweeney, 28, a luger from Portland, Maine. “I keep thinking of all the crappy situations I got through to get to this point, and it just feels like such a big risk just to be existing in this world right now.”

Avoiding Covid-19 had of course been a goal for athletes from the start of the pandemic; getting sick is at odds for people whose livelihoods depend on their physical well-being.

But at this point the concerns of Olympians — young, fit and vaccinated, as a whole — are less about the illness or any symptoms and more about the testing regimen. Athletes traveling to the Games must produce two negative results in the days before they fly to Beijing, and everyone on the ground there will be screened each day.

Positive tests could keep athletes from boarding their flights to Beijing or force them into an isolation period of indefinite length once there, rendering all their hard work, all their suffering and sacrifice, essentially meaningless. It is no surprise, then, that some Olympians have been plagued by feelings of helplessness, a sense that at any point their dreams could be dashed before they even begin.

“We are playing Russian roulette every single day,” said Brittany Bowe, an American speedskater. “You can take all the precautions, wash your hands, wear a mask, and somehow you can still get Covid. In my opinion it is luck of the draw at this point.”

Anxious about the unknown, athletes have taken fate into their own hands. They have shrunk their lives into streams of socially distanced training sessions and an unending blur of deep nasal swabs.

The snowboarder Maddie Mastro estimated that she had not seen her family or friends, besides her boyfriend, since November. Like other athletes interviewed for this article, Mastro said she long ago stopped dining out and had been wearing a mask at all times whenever she was away from home.

Nathan Chen, the top men’s figure skater in the United States, has been regularly spotted wearing masks during full-speed practice sessions on the ice before these Games.

The Australian figure skater Kailani Craine, nervous about pulling her mask down for even a moment, has been reluctant to eat even on lengthy flights this season, lest she make herself the slightest bit more vulnerable to infection, according to her coach, Tiffany Chin.

Maame Biney, an American short-track skater, had planned to go out and celebrate with her family and close friends after securing her place on the team — before thinking better of it at the last minute.

“I was like, ‘No wait, if I get Covid, then I’m not going, and that’s not fair to me or my teammates to risk that,’” she said. “And so I told them, ‘Hey guys, I just need to stay super safe, and I can’t go outside, so we can have a FaceTime celebration.’”

Her teammate, Kristen Santos, on top of double-masking at all times, has put her fiancé “on lockdown” this month, limiting his movements to minimize her risk of contracting a case.

“He went for groceries at 10 p.m. the other day,” Santos said.

In Europe, members of the American biathlon team have been operating in “roommate pods” while bouncing from training camps to events: Their roommates are the only people they can eat with or generally be around without a mask.

“It’s certainly shaping every aspect of our day-to-day lives, because it would be a major, major bummer to miss out on four years — a lifetime really — of hard work for a careless moment,” said Susan Dunklee, a biathlete heading to her third consecutive Olympics, who has been craving things as simple as going out for coffee on a day off. “Sometimes you do go crazy in your hotel room.”

Covid anxieties have even reshaped the way teams train.

For instance, the four men competing in the team pursuit event for the U.S. speedskating team, the current world-record holders, are limiting the amount of time they actually practice together — the event requires skaters to come into physical contact — to reduce the risk of getting the virus.

Similarly, Joel Johnson, the coach of the American women’s ice hockey team, said he was struggling to strike a balance between taking precautions and arranging sufficient training time for his players. For now, producing negative tests was occupying more brain space than planning for the Games.

“Covid worries us more than anything,” said Johnson, who has been holding team meetings virtually. “We’re not worried about any opponent, whether it’s Canada or Finland or Russia or Switzerland or anybody. Right now, we’re worried about how do we get there and how do we get there prepared to play?”

The risks of athletes congregating in one place became clear this month at the U.S. figure skating championships, where eight people — three individual skaters, one pairs team, one ice dance team and one coach — withdrew from the event after testing positive for Covid.

In other sports, athletes are skipping competitions that might normally serve as final dress rehearsals for the Olympics. An unusually high number of top athletes — a group that included the American snowboarders Shaun White and Chloe Kim and the Chinese skier Eileen Gu — elected to skip the X Games this weekend in Aspen, Colo.

“That was a calculation a lot of people had to make,” said Gus Kenworthy, a British freestyle skier and two-time Olympic medalist who is attending the X Games. He was wiped out for several days after contracting the coronavirus in October.

The effect of all this — isolating before entering further isolation in Beijing — has placed a heavy mental burden on athletes.

Jessica Bartley, director of mental health services for Team USA, said she and her colleagues had heard from countless Olympians struggling with the uncertainty of the moment. Bartley and her team have doled out guidance, and tangible steps big and small, to help put the Olympians’ minds at ease.

	<p>“I think it feels like it’s a little more in your control if you have these things to do,” she said.</p> <p>And so athletes are mustering up their last bits of discipline and determination to navigate these final, perilous days before the Olympics. There is one last kick in the race to the Games, and no one wants to stumble now.</p> <p>“Now is not the time to loosen up on that stuff,” Mastro said. “Now’s the time to tighten up on it.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Omicron small towns small error margins</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/23/us/omicron-workers-small-towns.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/23/us/omicron-workers-small-towns.html</a>
GIST	<p>In Marvell, Ark., a tiny Mississippi Delta town of 855 residents tucked into a sea of cotton, soy bean and corn fields, Lee Guest is a particularly essential essential worker.</p> <p>He is the mayor and the assistant fire chief, and his day job is as a rural mail carrier. If the four employees of the local water utility don’t show up, he knows enough about the system to keep the water flowing, too.</p> <p>“There’s a handful of us — we can go get stuff taken care of,” he said.</p> <p>So when he was away from work for a week after contracting Covid-19 at the beginning of the year, the worn engine of small town governance and administration in Marvell, about a 90-minute drive southwest from Memphis, sputtered and coughed, but it chugged on.</p> <p>Out of 13 full-time and 11 part-time employees, six have gotten Covid-19. One, who went to a hospital but wasn’t admitted, got sick in 2020. The rest of the cases have tested positive in the last three weeks.</p> <p>It’s a familiar story in small towns across the country, where the spike in infections from the Omicron variant hit local governments with particular force. The virus has ripped through big cities like Los Angeles and New York, sidelining thousands of police officers and transit operators. In many, leaders have rushed to reassure residents that firefighters and paramedics will show up when they call amid record absences.</p> <p>But in small communities, the people responsible for keeping crucial public services up and running say the strain is acute: With bare-bones workforces already stretched thin, there is no margin for error when multiple workers have to call in sick.</p> <p>“Small as we are, if we get one phone call, that can cause a ripple,” said Sean Pederson, the city manager of Bonner Springs, Kan., a community of about 7,800 residents some 20 miles west of Kansas City.</p> <p>Mr. Pederson said he has found himself mopping floors during the pandemic when city hall janitors were out with the virus. Over the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday weekend, a snowstorm blanketed the region. With multiple employees out on the city’s public works staff, other departments scrambled to find workers to plow the streets.</p> <p>Verden, Okla., population 508, narrowly avoided having to cancel a town council meeting for lack of a quorum earlier this month. Three of five council members had been sick or in quarantine, and Oklahoma ended the state of emergency that allowed for remote meetings, said Tessa Upton, the town clerk.</p> <p>Ms. Upton, who is one of two people who works in the main office at town hall, said she has asked residents to drop their water bill payments through a slot in the door largely to protect the town’s utility billing clerk. If residents must come in, she said, they’ve been asked to wear masks — a request often ignored by the residents of the town in Grady County, where just 36 percent of the population is fully vaccinated.</p> <p>“We’re trying to stay safe in here,” she said. “If we go down, we’re not going to have water.”</p>

The stresses are the effects of short-term pandemic crises piled on top of demographic trends that have played out over decades as work has disappeared in industries like agriculture and manufacturing, and young people leave for better opportunities elsewhere.

“Longer term, we’ve seen really strong economic challenges in rural America as the urban-rural divide has expanded,” said Brooks Rainwater, director of the National League of Cities’ Center for City Solutions. The pandemic, he said, has compounded those issues by exacerbating existing labor shortages, making it tougher for small municipal agencies to quickly staff up if people are sick or decide to leave.

“Rural governments are small by design,” he said.

Marvell was never a big city, but longtime residents say it used to be a more lively community. In the middle of the last century, a commuter railway stopped in downtown, where there were, at one point, three hotels. Then the commuter trains became cargo rail, and by the late 1970s, that was gone, too.

Now, the town’s two grocery stores and three clothing stores are gone. Nearly all of the remaining businesses — including a handful of chain convenience stores and gas stations — line the highway that ushers travelers toward Helena, the county seat and home to the King Biscuit Blues Festival. The gathering brings in hundreds of thousands of music lovers hoping to experience Delta blues in the area’s biggest annual event.

(Marvell’s own hope for luring tourists is the rustic, wood-sided boyhood home of Levon Helm, the former drummer and singer for the rock group the Band. The home opened to visitors in 2019 after it was moved from a smaller outpost known as Turkey Scratch into Marvell, where Mr. Helm attended school.)

The pandemic has disrupted more than local government in Marvell.

Matthew Catlett, the owner of three auto and agricultural supply stores in Marvell and the surrounding area, said that in the early days of shutdowns, farmers and residents were able to take on projects they had been putting off, which translated into more business.

But now, amid the Omicron-driven surge, Mr. Catlett said he is starting to feel a pinch in new ways. Supply chain problems have caused backups and shortages in everything from microchips and car parts to Pepsi products. An outbreak in Memphis has snarled deliveries.

He has had trouble recruiting workers ahead of the busy season for farmers, which starts in March, and he is concerned that new surges of infection are in the future.

“We need to get more people in here in case something like that does happen,” he said.

Bennie Daniels Jr., the town’s police chief, said the department was already understaffed when he came down with Covid a few days after the mayor tested positive. The department would have as many as four full-time officers and eight part-time if it were fully staffed, but right now, there is half that.

Mr. Daniels has picked up night shifts to help relieve other staff members. He conducts traffic stops, responds to calls about fights involving juveniles and does whatever else is needed.

“I do everything my guys do, of course,” he said.

And then his sergeant — the other working full-time police officer — got sick, too. Mr. Daniels asked the county sheriff’s department and the state to help patrol while he finished his own isolation period. He returned to work, picking up back-to-back shifts, as soon as he was able to. This week, he estimated his days were 18 to 20 hours long.

	<p>“My hope is that one day we’ll get a handle on this thing,” he said. In the meantime, he got his officers a raise to \$15 per hour from \$13.</p> <p>Mr. Daniels said that everyone in the department is vaccinated, and that he didn’t encounter much pushback.</p> <p>Still, the town has not been immune from the political divisions and misinformation around the pandemic that have afflicted communities of all sizes. Mr. Guest, the mayor, said the backlash against encouraging residents to get vaccinated prompted him to quit Facebook for a while.</p> <p>“I’m getting chewed out by people I grew up with,” said Mr. Guest, a lifelong resident who describes his ascent to the city’s top job almost like he was drafted. “There are times where I just want to be a mailman.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 Tonga volcano eruption, tsunami recovery</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/22/tonga-volcano-drinking-water-is-priority-as-aid-begins-to-arrive-for-stricken-nation">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/22/tonga-volcano-drinking-water-is-priority-as-aid-begins-to-arrive-for-stricken-nation</a>
GIST	<p>Tonga’s government said drinking water was the priority as the clean-up continued a week after a devastating volcanic eruption and tsunami.</p> <p>A national emergency team had already distributed 60,000 litres of water to residents, the government said on Saturday. A desalination plant on a New Zealand naval ship that arrived on Friday, capable of producing 70,000 litres a day, has started drawing seawater from Tonga’s harbour.</p> <p>Some services were returning in the Tongan capital, where people queued on Saturday to access cash after a week of chaos.</p> <p>Residents who had lost homes on outlying islands when <a href="#">a tsunami reaching up to 15 metres crashed over the South Pacific archipelago</a> would be relocated to the main island, Tongatapu, because of water and food shortages, the Tongan prime minister’s office said.</p> <p>Volcanic fallout on the surface of the ocean was damaging boats and making marine transport between the islands challenging, and domestic flights were suspended, it said.</p> <p>Ash fall and the tsunami had affected 84% of the population, and inter-island communications remain an “acute challenge” with limited satellite and radio links, it said.</p> <p>Burials were held earlier in the week for a Tongan man and a woman who had died when the tsunami hit the outlying Ha’apai islands. <a href="#">The official death toll is three.</a> A field hospital has been set up on Nomuka Island after the health centre there was swept away.</p> <p>Faka’iloatonga Taumoeolau, the coordinator for the project to rebuild Tonga’s parliament, said the restoration of international money transfer services, for limited hours on Saturday, was important for people to be able to buy essential goods.</p> <p>“Tongans have demonstrated their resilience in this calamity and will get back on their feet,” he said. More naval vessels from Australia, New Zealand and Britain are en route to Tonga to deliver aid. Two aid flights, from Japan and New Zealand, arrived on Saturday with humanitarian supplies, after two flights from Australia on Friday evening.</p> <p><a href="#">The Tongan government has implemented a strict Covid-19 policy</a> that means people, including aid workers, cannot enter the country unless they have undergone a three-week isolation period. Aid deliveries have been contactless, with pallets quarantined for 72 hours after arrival at the airport before being</p>



distributed by Tongan authorities. [One Australian aircraft returned to Brisbane midflight](#) on Thursday after being notified of a Covid case among the crew.

An aid delivery expected from China would also be contactless to prevent the spread of Covid, the government said.

“It is doable to get the aid in without compromising efforts on keeping Covid out,” Taumoevalau said.

An Australian navy vessel, HMAS Adelaide, was expected to arrive in Tonga on Wednesday with more bulk water and a 40-bed field hospital, Australia’s minister for international development and the Pacific, Zed Seselja, told reporters in Canberra on Saturday.

The Tongan government was doing “an extraordinary job on the ground”, he said.

Australia and New Zealand were coordinating an international aid effort with support from Britain, France, the United States, Fiji and Papua New Guinea, he said, and the Tongan government had asked for support to be paced so the small airport was not overwhelmed.

Asked by reporters about China’s aid program in the Pacific, Seselja said: “We welcome offers of support from anyone, including the Chinese government.”

Sione Hufanga, the resident United Nations country coordination specialist, said the agency is assisting the government in relief work as more people arrive at shelters and seek food and other supplies.

“Almost all crops in the country have been badly affected. Farmers have lost their homes and livelihood,” Hufanga said. “The country will be heavily relying on aid food for some time.”

The agricultural sector contributed nearly 14% of Tonga’s GDP in 2015-16 and represented over 65% of exports.

The Tongan government said it is “deeply appreciative to the international community” for its assistance, which included \$8m in funding from the World Bank and \$10m from the Asia Development Bank.

Reliance, a repair ship due to reconnect the undersea cable that links Tonga to international telecoms networks, left its Port Moresby mooring and was expected in Tonga on 30 January, according to Refinitiv data on shipping movements.

The vessel was expected to arrive “in the next few days” to repair the fibre-optic cable, the Tongan government said.

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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 US embassy Ukraine seeks staff evacuation</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/22/us-embassy-in-ukraine-requests-staff-evacuation-amid-war-fears">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/22/us-embassy-in-ukraine-requests-staff-evacuation-amid-war-fears</a>
GIST	<p>The US embassy in <a href="#">Ukraine</a> has requested the evacuation of all non-essential staff amid increasing fears of an imminent Russian invasion and the arrival overnight of arms deliveries promised by President Joe Biden, according to a CNN report.</p> <p>US evacuations are likely to start “as early as next week”, the US cable news network said, citing a source close to the Ukrainian government. It marks the embassy’s shift in focus towards “helping Ukraine bolster its defences in the face of growing Russian aggression”.</p> <p>The embassy in Kyiv <a href="#">also said on Twitter</a> that the first batch of fresh US assistance had arrived in Ukraine, which includes weaponry described as “200,000 pounds of lethal aid, including ammunition for the frontline defenders of Ukraine”.</p>

It follows Biden's assertion on Wednesday in a White House address that he now expected the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, to "move in" and invade Ukraine, in an act that would mean large-scale war returning to continental [Europe](#) for the first time in a generation.

"My guess is he will move in," Biden said in response to questions about whether an invasion was coming. "He has to do something."

It was also reported on Saturday that political advisers from Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany would hold "Normandy format" talks on eastern Ukraine in Paris on 25 January. Reuters attributed the development to a source in Putin's administration.

Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to Ukraine's chief negotiator, Andriy Yermak, confirmed that a meeting in Paris was planned but told Reuters a preliminary date had been set for 26 January.

The US secretary of state, Antony Blinken, held talks with Russian diplomats in Switzerland on Friday in an attempt to avert conflict, with Blinken and his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, striking a conciliatory tone and the diplomatic process ongoing.

"We didn't expect any breakthroughs to happen today," Blinken said after the meeting. "But I believe we are now on a clearer path in terms of understanding each other's concerns."

Britain and Russia's defence ministers will meet after Russia's Sergei Shoigu accepted an invitation from the UK's Ben Wallace to discuss mutual security. They will meet in Moscow.

"The secretary of state has been clear that he will explore all avenues to achieve stability and a resolution to the Ukraine crisis. We are in communication with the Russian government," a senior UK defence source told PA Media.

It comes after Downing Street warned Russia would be "punished" if the country pushes ahead with any "destabilising action" in Ukraine, as an estimated 100,000 Russian troops sit on the borders of Ukraine.

No 10 said if Putin launched an offensive there would be a "package of sweeping measures" launched by western allies against the Kremlin.

But Tom Tugendhat, the chair of the foreign affairs committee, demanded advance action, saying the UK should be ready to financially support Ukraine so it is prepared for an invasion.

"I'd like to see all of us going further, because one of the things that's delaying the ability of the Ukrainian people to mobilise their armed forces to meet any such invasion is, that has a huge effect on any country's economy," Tugendhat told the BBC. "If you take hundreds of thousands of people out of the workforce in order to stand guard they will have a real impact on jobs and lives in other sectors."

Tobias Ellwood, the chair of the commons defence committee, echoed concerns of a nearing military antagonism and said he believed a Russian invasion of Ukraine could be "imminent".

"Putin is taking full advantage of a weakened west. We are looking risk-averse, somewhat timid," he told the BBC. "Putin's ultimatum demanding Nato push back, of course that was dismissed but that's given him the pretext to say that there is an aggressor and that he must act."

"We see these combat-ready troop formations. He has actually boxed himself into a corner because so much effort has been put into this," Ellwood added. "He also recognises that he will never again be as strong as this to take advantage of the west's weakness. I suspect that an invasion is now imminent."

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SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/22/i-cried-all-day-the-anguish-of-people-locked-out-of-japan-by-covid">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/22/i-cried-all-day-the-anguish-of-people-locked-out-of-japan-by-covid</a>
GIST	<p>Late last year, Pablo Ortiz quit his job, sold his belongings and prepared to join his wife in <a href="#">Japan</a>, where she is studying for a doctorate.</p> <p>But 72 hours before he was due to leave Argentina, he checked the Japanese foreign ministry website to find that the government had imposed a near-blanket travel ban to prevent the spread of the Omicron variant of <a href="#">coronavirus</a>.</p> <p>“I called the Japanese embassy and they said I couldn’t fly,” said Ortiz, who has moved in with his mother and does not know when he will be able to join his wife, whom he has not seen since she visited Argentina last April.</p> <p>The 33-year-old is one of tens of thousands of people with plans to study, work or join relatives in Japan who now find themselves “locked out” of a country that has maintained some of the world’s strictest travel restrictions throughout the pandemic.</p> <p>The latest <a href="#">measures</a>, imposed at the end of November, apply to all arrivals except Japanese citizens and returning foreign residents – new students, guest workers, technical interns and, in some cases, the foreign spouses and children of Japanese nationals.</p> <p>Lewis Hussey had set his heart on studying in Japan before he graduates from university this summer. But the travel ban means the Missouri-based student has had to drastically rethink his plans.</p> <p>“It’s incredibly disappointing,” Hussey, 26, said. “There have been times when it looked like Japan was about to open up, and then it didn’t. It’s frustrating because I could have considered other places. I feel like I’ve been cheated out of the opportunity to study abroad because of the inconsistent and nonsensical approach of the Japanese government.”</p> <p>The World Health Organization has urged countries not to impose blanket travel bans, warning that they were ineffective in preventing the spread of the virus and created economic and social misery.</p> <p>Japan’s prime minister, <a href="#">Fumio Kishida</a>, is unlikely to make significant changes to the border policy, however, after a recent poll showed 88% of the public believed the measure was “appropriate”.</p> <p>But it has not prevented Omicron from taking hold in Japan, which reported a record 46,000 new cases of Covid-19 on Thursday. This weekend, large parts of the country, including Tokyo, will enter a quasi-state of emergency to relieve pressure on health services.</p> <p>Japan has imposed tight travel restrictions throughout the pandemic, with moves to relax them quickly undone by waves of infections driven by new variants. The only exception came last summer, when tens of thousands of athletes, officials and journalists arrived for the <a href="#">Tokyo Olympics</a>.</p> <p>Aware of how mismanagement of the pandemic helped topple his predecessor, <a href="#">Yoshihide Suga</a>, Kishida is hoping that travel restrictions will play well among voters during upper house elections in July.</p> <p>Kishida recently said the ban would be extended until the end of February, but Jade Barry is bracing herself for more delays.</p> <p>The 29-year-old was poised to fulfil her professional ambition of expanding her hairpiece business when the latest ban went into effect, forcing her to drop plans to scout locations in Tokyo for her new outlet.</p> <p>“I was devastated,” Barry said from her home near Chicago. “I cried all day and my kids were wondering what was wrong with mom.”</p>

“I have been in love with Japan since I was little. Expanding my business there was a way of realising my ultimate goal of starting a life there. I still believe it’s a beautiful country, but to be banned for so long means I feel resentment towards the government.”

Stranded students have found little sympathy among Japanese politicians but have received support from some business leaders, who say the ban will stifle innovation and threaten Japan’s long-term interests as more students look to other countries, including economic rivals such as South Korea.

Hiroshi Mikitani, chief executive of the e-commerce group Rakuten, has likened the ban to the isolation brought by the sakoku “locked country” policy during the Edo period (1603-1868). On the day Kishida extended the restrictions, Mikitani tweeted: “What is the point of not letting in new foreigners now? Do you want to shut Japan off from the rest of the world?”

A letter to Kishida signed this week by hundreds of academics and experts in Japan-US studies, urged his government to relax border controls to allow educators, students and scholars to enter Japan.

“They become the bridges between Japan and other societies. They are future policymakers, business leaders and teachers,” the letter said. “They are the foundation of the US-Japan alliance and other international relationships that support Japan’s core national interests. The closure is harming Japan’s national interests and international relationships.”

“It’s frustrating,” said Imane, a 20-year-old Canadian student who has waited two years to begin her Japanese-language studies in Tokyo. “It’s been two years of wasting time, waiting for Japan to open its borders.

“I love Japan so this is heartbreaking, but I can’t spend my whole life waiting,” added Imane, who preferred to use only her first name. “If Japan doesn’t open its borders this year I’m going to have to look elsewhere.”

Her frustrations are shared by Vilhelm, a student from Lithuania, who gets up at 4.30am for online classes in international business studies at a university in Tokyo.

“The most frustrating part is that I can see no end to this,” said Vilhelm, who asked that his surname not be used. “I’ve invested in studying in Japan and I feel like it is treating me very unfairly. I still love Japan, but sometimes I forget why.”

Barry took to social media to rally students and other stranded people behind a campaign to end the restrictions, with protests outside Japanese embassies planned for later this month.

“To have the opportunity to come to Japan ripped away is devastating. And I can’t imagine what it’s like not to be able to see your child because of border restrictions. The uncertainty is no longer acceptable. This is literally ruining people’s lives.”

The government responded to mounting criticism by opening the door, if only by a fraction. It will allow 87 students on government scholarships to enter in February, the chief cabinet secretary, Hirokazu Matsuno, said last week. But that leaves almost 150,000 others, mostly privately funded, who have been waiting up to two years to begin their studies.

They will continue to live in limbo, unsure of when they will be able to begin their new lives in a country that has effectively become a Covid hermit kingdom.

“Japan is damaging its soft power and its economy because it is punishing people who have a genuine interest in the country,” Orteza said. “It’s ruining its reputation. This will have long-term consequences for Japan.”

HEADLINE	01/21 How likely to catch Covid multiple times?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/21/covid-reinfection-how-likely-are-you-to-catch-virus-multiple-times">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/21/covid-reinfection-how-likely-are-you-to-catch-virus-multiple-times</a>
GIST	<p>Anecdotal reports of Covid reinfection in the UK are growing, including people testing positive just weeks apart in December and January, or having had the virus three or even four times. Children are also being seen with reinfections. We take a look at the science behind catching Covid multiple times.</p> <p><b>What is a reinfection?</b></p> <p>Reinfection figures tend to refer to the detection of a second, or subsequent, Covid infection, regardless of the variant involved. The risk of reinfection is likely to depend on a range of factors: for example, <a href="#">data suggests</a> it is higher in unvaccinated people and potentially in those whose previous infection was more mild with a lower immune response.</p> <p>It also depends on the variant: one expert said the risk of reinfection with Omicron soon after a first Omicron infection would be lower than Delta followed by Omicron, and how long ago someone was vaccinated. Experts say the dose to which someone is exposed may also be important.</p> <p>The UK <a href="#">Health</a> Security Agency (UKHSA) uses the definition of a possible reinfection as a case 90 days or more after a previous confirmed Covid infection, in part because it excludes those who simply shed the virus for longer after infection.</p> <p><b>How many reinfections have there been?</b></p> <p>According to the <a href="#">latest figures for England</a> from the UKHSA, from the start of the pandemic up to 9 January this year there were 425,890 possible reinfections, with 109,936 found in the week ending 9 January, accounting for almost 11% of all cases that week.</p> <p>Very few possible reinfections are “confirmed” as that requires genetic sequencing. What’s more, with few people in the community having access to tests in the first wave, many first infections may not have been counted.</p> <p>“With the combination of being two years into the pandemic, a few rounds of antibody waning, two major waves of immune evasion by Delta and then Omicron, there’s fairly rampant reinfection,” said Danny Altmann, a professor of immunology at Imperial College London.</p> <p><b>Is it easier to be reinfected with some variants?</b></p> <p>In short, yes. According to <a href="#">scientists at Imperial College London</a>, after taking into account a host of factors Omicron was associated with somewhere between a 4.38 and 6.63-fold higher risk of reinfection, compared with Delta.</p> <p>The team add that this means protection against catching Covid arising from a previous infection within the past six months has fallen from about 85% before Omicron turned up to somewhere between 0% and 27%. The drop is not surprising given that Omicron has been found to have the ability to dodge the body’s immune responses to a significant degree.</p> <p><b>Do Omicron reinfections happen in a shorter space of time?</b></p> <p>Potentially, yes. UKHSA data shows that for cases with a specimen date between 1 November and 29 December 2021 there were 2,855 probable reinfections 29 to 89 days after a previous infection – although some of these may reflect ongoing detection from an initial infection.</p> <p>While the UKHSA notes it is difficult to directly compare the situation between variants – as there are many important changing factors at play, including overall levels of immunity in the population – Omicron’s immunity-dodging powers are likely to play a role in these reinfections.</p> <p>It is not yet clear how well immune responses to Omicron protect against a second Omicron infection, or infections with new variants. “I would expect the risk of a second Omicron infection is a lot lower than the</p>

risk of Omicron following Delta after all you have developed antibodies to the actual Omicron spike protein,” said Paul Hunter, a professor in medicine at the University of East Anglia.

### **Why has my child had Covid twice this winter?**

That could well be due to different variants: according to [data from the Office for National Statistics](#) released in December, school-age children with Covid at that time were much less likely to have Omicron than Covid-positive adults. In other words, a previous recent infection could well have been Delta, while their latest is Omicron.

A UKHSA spokesperson said: “Data shows that those testing positive for coronavirus between 29 and 89 days of a prior infection accounts for a small proportion of all reinfections. Many of these shorter interval reinfections are likely to be school-age children because they had the highest levels of infection in September and October, just before Omicron emerged.”

### **Are reinfections milder?**

That may seem logical given the body’s prior immune response, and Hunter notes data suggests the viral load in reinfections is lower than in primary infections, suggesting the disease may, in general, be less severe. However, the severity of a reinfection depends on many factors, including the variant involved and a person’s vaccination status.

[ONS data suggests](#) that when the Alpha variant became dominant, symptoms were less common for reinfections – but this reversed when Delta became dominant. When Omicron became dominant, data suggests people were just as likely to have Covid symptoms in their second infection as their first infection. “There’s no shortage of reinfections, some pretty severe, although not requiring hospitalisations,” said Altmann.

### **How many times can people get Covid?**

Among those who have had Covid twice are the politicians Kier Starmer and Matt Hancock, while there have also been reports of people having a Covid infection three or even four times, some just a few weeks apart.

The UKHSA do not break down reinfections by episode, although they have identified some possible third reinfections. What is clear is that the longer Covid is with us, the more reinfections a person may potentially experience.

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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 England axes plan B; fears of more deaths</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/22/more-people-will-die-fears-clinically-vulnerable-england-axes-plan-b">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/22/more-people-will-die-fears-clinically-vulnerable-england-axes-plan-b</a>
GIST	<p>“We must learn to live with Covid in the same way we have to live with flu,” Sajid Javid told the nation this week. For most people, the parallel with flu is now valid: vaccinations and acquired immunity have <a href="#">defanged Covid</a> to the point that there is no longer much risk of becoming severely unwell.</p> <p>However, the pandemic’s finishing line has not yet come clearly into focus for a sizeable minority in society. In England, 3.7 million people fall in the <a href="#">clinically extremely vulnerable</a> (CEV) category, including those with blood cancers, an organ transplant, kidney disease and other conditions linked to immunosuppression.</p> <p>“It feels to me that lying behind the [lifting of restrictions] is the idea that probably everyone’s going to get it and everyone will be all right,” said Gemma Peters, the chief executive of Blood <a href="#">Cancer</a> UK. “In our community, that isn’t true. If more people get it, more people will die.”</p> <p>Starting from a far higher level of risk, those with suppressed immune systems also get less protection from vaccines and are accounting for an increasing proportion of ICU admissions and deaths. Yet many</p>



feel like a “forgotten minority”, according to Maggie Wearmouth, a GP and member of the government’s Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI).

“It’s fairly mind-blowing,” Wearmouth said. “They are an important and hugely vulnerable group that have been forgotten. I feel quite angry on their behalf.”

According to Wearmouth, this is not simply a case of these people being fundamentally frailer and more susceptible to all illness – although this will be true for some. Many of those with slow-growing blood cancers, for instance, would outwardly appear healthy and have lived essentially normal lives pre-Covid. Some felt no need to disclose their condition to friends, or even their children, before the pandemic.

The emergence of a new virus changed things for this group because it required building up immunity from scratch at a point in life when the immune system was compromised either through illnesses or treatments.

Early vaccine data for blood cancer patients – of whom there are 250,000 in the UK – found little or no antibody response to the first dose of vaccine. More recent data, [published this week in the Lancet](#), showed that for dialysis patients, even after two doses of the Oxford/AstraZeneca jab and one dose of Pfizer/BioNTech, more than half did not have detectable levels of antibodies against the Omicron variant.

This is not to say that vaccinations “don’t work” for these groups, but that immunity needs to be built up over repeated doses and may never be as robust.

Michelle Willicombe, a nephrologist and senior clinical lecturer at Imperial College Healthcare NHS trust, said: “Covid infection still remains a real threat to immunosuppressed patients in particular within the clinically extremely vulnerable groups. Not all immunosuppressed patients have mounted immune response to vaccinations, even after four doses.”

“Life for them can’t carry on as normal,” she added.

Despite the lower efficacy of vaccines in vulnerable groups, the roll-out of third doses before the Omicron wave struck was slow, meaning that many are yet to have a fourth dose, which they would now be eligible for if things had moved quicker in the autumn. According to UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) data, 84% of those in the extremely vulnerable category have had a third or booster dose, but the figure is expected to be far lower for [fourth doses](#) (UKHSA did not have available data).

“I’ve got a real worry about this,” said Peters. “Probably half the calls to our support line are people who are struggling to get their fourth dose.”

There is a viable pathway to a more normal life, despite it being a longer and more difficult one, according to Peters. Newly available antiviral drugs, including [Pfizer’s Paxlovid and Merck’s molnupiravir](#), significantly reduce the chances of hospitalisation and death if taken during the first few days of illness and are now available to those in the vulnerable category.

Some countries, although not the UK, are using [monoclonal antibodies](#) as prevention against infection in immunosuppressed people who have not mounted an immune response to vaccines. Some argue they should be made available in the UK, particularly if new immunity-evading variants emerge. There is also a concern over whether free lateral flow tests will remain available to those in the vulnerable group so that they can continue to ask family and friends to test before meeting up.

“If we had all of that in place it would give people a roadmap to a world where it becomes endemic and they can still see their friends,” said Peters.

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SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/22/taiwan-sees-sharp-rise-in-covid-cases-posing-risk-to-lunar-new-year">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/22/taiwan-sees-sharp-rise-in-covid-cases-posing-risk-to-lunar-new-year</a>
GIST	<p>Taiwan has reported a sharp rise in Covid-19 cases with a cluster among workers at a factory threatening authorities' tenuous control of an Omicron outbreak on the eve of Lunar New Year.</p> <p>On Saturday, Taiwan's centre for disease control reported 82 domestic cases, including 63 found at the Taoyuan factory in a first round of testing on Friday. Most of those sick are migrant workers, health and welfare minister Chen Shih-chung said.</p> <p>Taiwan maintains strict controls on its borders, with the few eligible entrants sent into 14 days of quarantine, seven days of self-managed semi-isolation, and multiple tests. With Omicron sweeping around the world, larger numbers of positive cases have been reported among new arrivals, despite requirements for a negative test before boarding departure flights.</p> <p>In recent weeks authorities have responded to clusters in Taoyuan connected to the international airport, and another in the southern city of Kaohsiung. Among Saturday's figures were 14 new cases in the latter cluster, but the CDC said the airport cluster appears to have stabilised after tracing and isolation efforts. Saturday's figures followed 23 cases reported on Friday, in Taoyuan and Kaohsiung.</p> <p>Taiwan has adopted a zero-Covid strategy in practice, if not formal policy, which has <a href="#">kept the island relatively Covid free</a> for most of the pandemic. <a href="#">Its largest outbreak</a> in the second half of 2021 saw more than 800 died after the Alpha variant infected thousands and a small rural outbreak of Delta infected 17, but it was eventually brought back to zero.</p> <p>In the months since, vaccination rates have increased and booster shots have begun to be rolled out. The capital city Taipei on Friday launched a mandatory vaccine passport for entry into some venues, like bars and clubs. On Saturday the CDC said 73% of migrant workers were vaccinated with two doses.</p> <p>Governments and companies in Taiwan were criticised last year for <a href="#">poor treatment of migrant workers during the outbreak</a>. Thousands were ordered to remain in crowded dorms, which many feared put them at higher risk of contracting Covid-19, and they were subjected to harsher restrictions than local employees who worked along side them.</p> <p>On Saturday, the ministry of labor recommended migrant workers in Taoyuan not go out into the city or Greater Taipei, and said companies which employ 50 or more migrant workers to conduct mass testing. With Lunar New Year holidays beginning next week, authorities urged people to be cautious in mixing with others and travel, but did not impose restrictions.</p> <p>The increased transmissibility of the Omicron variant has challenged the remaining jurisdictions with zero Covid strategies. In nearby Hong Kong authorities found at least 75 community cases at a residential block on Friday, the South China Morning Post reported. Another residential block was placed into a five-day lockdown on Friday after 34 cases were detected.</p> <p>Hong Kong has reintroduced social restrictions and imposed other controversial measures, including ordering the surrender and destruction of more than 2,000 hamsters across the city after 11 were found to be infected at a pet shop where an employee fell ill with Covid.</p> <p><a href="#">In China, Omicron has been detected</a> in at least seven of the country's 31 provinces, including several cases in the capital, Beijing. A range of restrictions have been imposed by local authorities, causing some confusion and fear around the possibility of travel during the Lunar New Year period.</p> <p>Authorities in the north-eastern city of Harbin said on Saturday that they will conduct a city-wide exercise to test its roughly 10 million people for Covid from Monday, although it has had no recent cases, calling it an pre-emptive move ahead of the holiday.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/22 US shipment security aid arrives in Kiev
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/22/first-shipment-latest-round-security-aid-arrives-k/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/22/first-shipment-latest-round-security-aid-arrives-k/</a>
GIST	<p>The first shipment of a \$200 million U.S. security assistance package aimed at boosting Ukrainian defense forces arrived in Kyiv, the U.S. Embassy announced Saturday.</p> <p>The delivery touched down at Kyiv's Boryspil International Airport amid heightened tensions stemming from Russia's troop buildup along its border with Ukraine.</p> <p>"The donation, which includes close to 200,000 pounds of lethal security assistance, including ammunition for the front line defenders of Ukraine, demonstrates the United States' strong commitment to Ukraine's sovereign right to self-defense," the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv said in a statement.</p> <p>U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Kyiv earlier this week.</p> <p>The U.S. has committed more than \$650 million in security assistance to Kyiv over the past year. The latest aid package to Ukraine was approved in December.</p> <p>"The United States will continue to provide such assistance to support the Armed Forces of Ukraine, supporting them in relentlessly protecting Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity from Russian aggression.," the embassy said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/21 Cruise protocols amid omicron surge
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2022/01/21/cruise-protocols-covid-omicron-cancel/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2022/01/21/cruise-protocols-covid-omicron-cancel/</a>
GIST	<p>It's not the most carefree time to go on a cruise.</p> <p>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently <a href="#">warned</a> all travelers, even those who are vaccinated, to avoid cruise ships. Infections are soaring during the omicron surge, with ships reporting 14,803 <a href="#">coronavirus</a> cases onboard between Dec. 30 and Jan. 12. That number was below 200 in early December. Passengers and crew have told horror <a href="#">stories</a> about being stuck in isolation for days, with only lukewarm room service and in-room TV to pass the time.</p> <p>There is a fresh level of uncertainty to sailing now: Several cruise lines have <a href="#">canceled</a> trips in the near future and longer term, and ports have been turning ships away.</p> <p>Despite the CDC's advice, travelers will still book cruises as long as they're allowed. Here are answers to 10 common questions they may be asking at <a href="#">this stage</a> of the omicron wave.</p> <p><b>Will my cruise be canceled?</b></p> <p>Not necessarily. Cruise lines have canceled voyages on more than 25 ships in the past several weeks. Some were scheduled to depart right away, and others were set to leave months in the future. But many, many other ships have continued to sail as planned.</p> <p><b>Will my cruise stop at ports on the original itinerary?</b></p> <p>No guarantees! Cruise ships have been turned away from destinations including Bonaire, Aruba, Curaçao, Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, and Cartagena, Colombia, in recent weeks because of outbreaks. It's hard to predict when a voyage might be disrupted.</p> <p><b>Do I need to be vaccinated?</b></p> <p>With very few exceptions, yes. Some cruise lines such as Norwegian and Viking, won't let anyone on board who isn't vaccinated. Others such as Royal Caribbean mandate vaccination for everyone 12 and older. Carnival Cruise Line offers vaccine exemptions to a "very small number" of kids under 12 and passengers who can't be vaccinated for medical reasons. And still others, including Disney Cruise Line, require vaccination for everyone who is eligible, meaning anyone 5 and older.</p>

**Are boosters required?**

It depends on the cruise line, but the vast majority of passengers do not need to have a booster. Some small operators, including Azamara, UnCruise Adventures and Grand Circle Cruise Line, have said they will require boosters in the coming weeks or months. Many larger cruise companies, including Carnival, Princess, Oceania and Royal Caribbean, say they strongly recommend additional shots for those eligible, but they do not require them.

**Do I need a test to get on a ship?**

Yes. Cruise lines are requiring vaccinated passengers to test negative within the two days before boarding their ship. Some cruise companies allow self-tests that are observed via video, while others are administering their own tests. Basic home tests without supervision are not permitted. Unvaccinated passengers 2 and older have more stringent testing requirements.

**Will I need to wear a mask?**

Under most circumstances, yes. Passengers don't need to mask up in their own staterooms or while eating and drinking. Face coverings are only required outdoors if physical distancing from other people is not possible.

**How do I know if my cruise line is following CDC guidance?**

Now that the CDC rules have expired and become [recommendations](#), cruise lines can opt into a voluntary program. If they do, they will agree to keep adhering to all of the guidelines and reporting case information the same way. Ships that participate will continue to appear on the CDC website that [tracks coronavirus on ships](#) and will be color-coded based on whether cases have been reported; those that don't participate will be designated as gray.

Originally, operators had until Friday to inform the agency if they would follow the guidelines. But that deadline has been extended because the voluntary program guidance wasn't ready, CDC spokeswoman Caitlin Shockey said Friday. At that time, the new date had not yet been announced.

So far, the lines that are part of Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings — Norwegian Cruise Line, Oceania Cruises and Regent Seven Seas Cruises — have opted in.

For now, Shockey said, all ships are still reporting cases under the previous method and will continue to be assigned a color status unless they choose to stop participating.

**How can I tell if there have been coronavirus cases on my ship?**

The CDC's ["cruise ship color status"](#) indicates if ships have reported cases in the past seven days.

Green means there are no reported cases, while orange means the number is below the threshold for investigation by the CDC. The yellow status means the ship has met the requirements for an investigation — which can mean one or more cases reported in crew, or cases reported in 0.1 percent or more of passengers — and red means the ship is at or above the threshold and may need to take additional public health precautions.

Some caveats: If a cruise line decides not to participate in the CDC's voluntary program, it will be listed as gray and will not include the same level of information. And even when they do participate, the information is minimal: The CDC does not include the number of cases on a ship, and cruise lines only occasionally release those numbers publicly.

**What happens if I test positive on board?**

In most cases, passengers who test positive during a cruise will be moved to new quarters closer to the medical center to isolate. Some cruise lines move passengers to land-based facilities to isolate. On board, passengers should expect to order room service for their meals. Some have [reported](#) long waits to place orders and receive their food.

**What if I want to cancel my cruise?**

	<p>Cancellation policies vary with each cruise line, though passengers who can't sail because of a positive coronavirus test have widespread flexibility. It is best to carefully examine your cruise line's policy and any dates that apply.</p> <p>For sailings booked by March 31, for example, sister lines <a href="#">Royal Caribbean International</a> and <a href="#">Celebrity Cruises</a> allow passengers to cancel up to 48 hours before their sail date and get a credit for a future cruise.</p> <p>Norwegian Cruise Line has <a href="#">more conditions</a>. The operator says anyone booked by Jan. 31 on trips scheduled through March 31 can cancel up to 24 hours in advance (for future cruise credit) under a few scenarios: if the passenger's local government restricts nonessential travel abroad, if rules change in destinations to require quarantine upon arrival, or if the country where a cruise starts or ends closes to visitors from the passenger's country.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 Western drought improves; hurdles remain</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2022/01/22/drought-west-us-improves/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2022/01/22/drought-west-us-improves/</a>
GIST	<p>The season's latest snowpack numbers in the Western United States are a big improvement from where they were in early December. But there's a lot of winter left, and long-term drought remains an ever-present hurdle. So where are we, and what's to come?</p> <p>Let's start with the good news. Since early December, weather patterns have boosted snowpack across the West to above-normal levels for this time of the year.</p> <p>On Dec. 1, snowpack across most of the basins in the West was less than 75 percent of historical norms; many were below 25 percent. Starting Dec. 10, <a href="#">a series</a> of atmospheric rivers and snow events erased those deficits. By January, basin totals in California had increased to about 200 percent of normal. California ended the month much wetter than average, which was much needed, since seven of its last 10 winters have been drier than average.</p> <p>In Colorado, <a href="#">all Snow Telemetry (SNOTEL) stations</a> showed that snowpack was below the 50th percentile in early December. In early January, nearly half of the stations reported in the 75th percentile. Wolf Creek Summit, one of Colorado's highest-elevation observation sites, reported an impressive 18-inch increase in snowpack.</p> <p>Current snow cover is holding steady across the mountain areas, with the highest elevations at around 50 inches or more of snow depth, and mid-elevations between 20 and 50 inches. In Mount Rainier National Park in Washington, the Paradise Ranger Station is reporting snow depth of 110 inches (after reporting 100 inches of snowfall over one month).</p> <p>The shift from dry conditions to a wet pattern has been evident in the <a href="#">U.S. Drought Monitor</a>. Most high-elevation areas have seen a one-category improvement in drought from Dec. 14 to Jan. 11. Isolated areas in California, western Nevada, northern Idaho, western Montana and northern Colorado have seen two-category improvements.</p> <p>In Utah, "extreme" to "exceptional" drought conditions covered more than half the state from September 2020 until Dec. 28, 2021. As of Jan. 18, only 30 percent of the state was in extreme drought, with no areas under exceptional drought. Since early December, severe to exceptional drought conditions also eased in Idaho, decreasing by nearly half.</p> <p>While there's a lot of good news to go around, how much impact this short-term recovery will have in the long term remains to be seen. A couple of key points to keep in mind are 1) soil moisture deficits still exist, and 2) there's a lot more snow season to go.</p>

Soil moisture deficit is the first to get filled when the snowpack starts to melt in the spring. Across the West, soil moisture in the fall, just before the ground froze, ranked in the driest percentiles for much of the region, except in portions of Washington.

The [Colorado Basin River Forecast Center](#) accounts for those soil moisture deficits when estimating inflows into Lake Powell for seasonal water supply forecasts. Inflows into the reservoir are at 95 percent of average. While near average isn't so bad (and much better than last spring, which was near record low), it isn't quite enough to help erase the long-term drought situation that's been plaguing the major reservoirs since the early 2000s.

We also need to keep an eye on the rest of the cold season. Being in a good position on Jan. 15 is good. For meaningful recovery, though, we need to be in that good position on March 15, April 15 and into May.

Ideally, the Lower Sacramento Basin in California would continue accumulating about 16 inches of snowpack from now until mid-March to keep up with historical norms. The Clearwater Basin in Idaho needs an additional 11 inches, and the Weber Basin in Utah needs another 10. Above-average snowpack now can quickly switch to below average with a few missed storms or a stubborn ridge of high pressure.

La Niña is [expected to continue](#) into the spring. For the Northwest, the wet pattern is likely to continue, which means snowpack will probably remain in good condition.

For the Southwest, it's going to be tough. Precipitation is likely to be less than average for Arizona, New Mexico, and the southern portions of California, Nevada, Utah and Colorado. If the outlook pans out, expect to see those spring water supply forecasts decrease and for drought to persist through the summer months.

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HEADLINE	01/22 Europe airlines fly near-empty flights
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/22/omicron-airlines-europe/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/22/omicron-airlines-europe/</a>
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS — As the omicron variant derails travel plans around the world, airlines say strict European Union regulations are forcing them to fly near-empty flights — unnecessary and environmentally harmful flights that they argue they need to fly to save their long-term takeoff and landing slots at European airports.</p> <p>Airlines must use a certain percentage of their designated slots at airports to hold on to them. But low demand during the pandemic has led airlines to fly near empty flights, often known as ghost flights, to meet the requirements.</p> <p>Lufthansa, a large German airline, has said it canceled 33,000 trips, or 10 percent of its winter flights, because of low demand but still anticipates needing to fly 18,000 “poorly booked” flights to secure its slots.</p> <p>The E.U. waived these requirements at the beginning of the pandemic but partially reinstated them last year. Before the pandemic, airlines needed to use 80 percent of their takeoff and landing slots to keep them. Last year, the E.U. said airlines need to use at least 50 percent of them and allowed them to apply for exceptions if they need to go below that threshold.</p> <p>But airlines and environmental groups say it is not enough and the rules for exemptions are unclear. They want the E.U. to scrap the thresholds all together — at least during the pandemic. The requirement is scheduled to increase to <a href="#">64 percent</a> in the spring.</p> <p>The American Federal Aviation Administration has minimum slot requirements at three airports — New York’s Kennedy and La Guardia airports and Washington’s Reagan National Airport — and <a href="#">waived the requirements</a> through March 2022 for international flights.</p>

“We would rather cancel them, and they should also be avoided for the sake of the environment,” Maaïke Andriess, spokesperson for Brussels Airlines, which is owned by Lufthansa, told the Brussels Times, adding that she anticipates the airline needing to cancel 3,000 flights from now until March.

E.U. officials have defended their policies and say they need to strike a balance between protecting consumers and boosting a hampered airline industry. If airlines could cancel flights with impunity, for example, they would be able to frequently rebook passengers on flights on different days to maximize profits.

A senior European Commission official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to speak publicly on the issue, told reporters last week that it had no evidence of airlines, including Lufthansa, needing to fly “ghost flights” during the omicron variant and provided statistics showing that air travel in the first days of January is around 77 percent of pre-pandemic times and expected to go up.

During the pandemic, the E.U. has [provided](#) the airline industry tens of billions of dollars in bailout money.

“As required, the protection of historic slots must be balanced with the need to ensure that airport capacity is used in a pro competitive way for the benefit of all consumers,” E.U. spokesman Daniel Ferrie told reporters.

Magdalena Heuwieser, spokesperson for Stay Grounded, a network of more than 170 organizations that advocates for alternatives to air travel, argued that the E.U. should encourage fewer flights to take off, not create rules that incentivize airlines to fly more planes.

She said this could also encourage airlines to lower fares to get more people on board — something that environmental groups have long advocated against, saying planes carry large carbon footprints and should only be used if trains or other modes are not feasible.

“In times of climate crisis, you cannot afford any unnecessary flights,” Heuwieser said.

Ryanair — a large European-based budget airline — has said its low-cost fares have spared them from some of the challenges that other airlines have faced during the pandemic, arguing it is unnecessary to fly “ghost flights” and called on Lufthansa to lower its prices to get more people on board.

“The solution to Lufthansa’s ‘ghost flights’ problem is a simple one — just sell these seats to consumers,” Michael O’Leary, CEO of Ryanair, said in a statement last week. “If Lufthansa really needs to operate these flights, then they should be required to sell these seats to the public at low fares.”

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HEADLINE	01/21 Options short of multi-front invasion?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/putin-ukraine-attack-options/2022/01/21/6ffc80ba-7ae0-11ec-b79d-e53ef5e1fbe2_story.html">https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/putin-ukraine-attack-options/2022/01/21/6ffc80ba-7ae0-11ec-b79d-e53ef5e1fbe2_story.html</a>
GIST	<p>Troops, tanks, missiles and warships are on the move. Russian forces, slowly but surely, are surrounding Ukraine on three sides. The picture on the ground suggests that Russian President Vladimir Putin is about to launch a massive, multi-front offensive into a neighboring nation that for eight years has been slipping from his grasp into the hands of the West.</p> <p>But the former KGB lieutenant colonel — who has spent his career refining tactics to keep his adversaries off balance and exploit their differences — retains a plethora of options short of starting a full-blown, mass-casualty war that would put his own economy and soldiers at risk.</p> <p>President Biden alluded to those possibilities during a <a href="#">news conference</a> Wednesday. Biden made, and later corrected, a <a href="#">gaffe</a> suggesting that a “minor incursion” would be more permissible, but he revealed an uncomfortable truth at the same time: The United States and its NATO allies have agreed to inflict a</p>



devastating economic blow on Russia if Moscow invades Ukraine, but actions short of war — such as cyberattacks or sabotage — could divide allies over how aggressively to respond.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken tried to walk back that admission Friday after a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Geneva, underscoring that actions apart from a military invasion, including cyberattacks or paramilitary activity, “will also be met with a decisive, calibrated, and again, united response.” Blinken noted that Russia is hatching plans for subversive activity that may not look like a traditional invasion.

“We’ve seen plans to undertake a variety of destabilizing actions, some of them short of the overt use of force, to destabilize Ukraine, to topple the government — a variety of things,” Blinken said.

His comments came a week after the Biden administration, without going into detail, warned that U.S. intelligence had obtained information about a group of saboteurs, trained in urban warfare and explosives, that Russia sent into east Ukraine. The U.S. Treasury on Thursday sanctioned four current and former Ukrainian officials whom Washington said had been acting with Russian intelligence to lay the “groundwork for creating a new, Russian-controlled government in Ukraine.”

The result is an increased focus on what some military analysts call the “gray zone,” the nebulous space between war and peace where a country can take measures — ranging from election meddling and cyber-hacks to assassinations and arms-length coups d’etat — to shape the fate of another nation without the costs of military warfare.

The Kremlin has a long track record of such activity dating back to the Cold War, and more recently including the [hack and release of emails](#) from top Democratic Party officials during the 2016 presidential campaign — an operation that U.S. authorities attributed to Russian military intelligence.

Even if Putin decides to launch a formal military assault on Ukraine, it is far from clear that the Russian leader would opt, at the outset, for a mass ground offensive that would entail occupying large Ukrainian cities or marching on Kyiv.

Because Ukraine has limited air defenses, Russia would probably secure early dominance in the air, which would allow its forces to carry out decapitating strikes in Kyiv and across the country, potentially forcing the government to capitulate to the Kremlin’s demands even before any tanks rolled across the border.

“I think Russia has left itself many flexible or scalable military options and can pursue a spectrum of activities,” said Dara Massicot, a senior policy researcher at the Rand Corp. who focuses on Russia. “For example, they can gradually increase the pressure starting with cyberattacks, increase harassment along the lines of contact, all the way up to a large-scale multi-domain operation using air, missile and ground attacks.”

Massicot said Russia could reduce its combat exposure and minimize casualties by leading with airstrikes, standoff precision munitions or even long-range artillery fire, all of which could be launched from afar and still have a significant impact on Ukraine.

The buildup Putin has engineered along the border would amplify any actions Russia decided to take short of an invasion by keeping the threat of a full-scale ground war looming in the background.

Some analysts argue that Moscow has no intention of invading but is escalating tensions to persuade Washington to accept its core demand that Ukraine be barred from NATO.

Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, said that for Moscow, the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO is like the 1962 Cuban missile crisis “on steroids” because of the risk that missiles could be deployed there in the future. He dismissed the idea of a Russian invasion.



“This ‘minor incursion, major incursion’ is all part of Western fears and fantasies and has no relevance to the thinking in the Kremlin or the plans of the General Staff” of Russia’s armed forces, Trenin said.

“The idea behind Russia’s moves, in my view, is not to wage war against Ukraine but to use a demonstration of military power to bring the United States to the negotiating table to discuss security issues in Europe, including those related to Ukraine.”

Fyodor Lukyanov, a prominent Russian foreign policy analyst and a member of the Russian International Affairs Council, said the Kremlin’s goal was to redraw the European security balance between NATO and Russia and sweep away Euro-Atlantic institutions as the basis of European security, “because from Russia’s point of view it’s not working.”

He said the goal is too ambitious to be achieved through routine diplomacy, hence Russia’s escalation of military pressure.

For Moscow, “threatening Ukraine is not enough” to achieve the concessions it wants from the United States, Lukyanov said, suggesting that Moscow might do something provocative away from Ukraine. “It might mean that the Western fixation on Ukraine might be not entirely correct, and in order to increase tension and step up the escalation process, actions might be taken somewhere else.”

Putin has said he will take “military-technical” actions if NATO does not accept his demands. Some analysts believe that could include placing more aggressive weapons in locations that directly threaten the United States and NATO allies.

Military analyst Rob Lee, of the war studies department at King’s College London, believes that a Russian military operation against Ukraine is more likely than not, in part because of the unprecedented scale of the Russian military buildup underway around the country.

“It looks like they’ve deployed units from every military district, including the Northern Fleet, to near Ukraine. That’s unprecedented,” Lee said. “They’re moving equipment from not far from the border of North Korea all the way to Belarus. They’re doing a ton of things that are not standard. What they’re doing is not something they’ve done before, so we’re in uncharted waters.”

He said Moscow wants to prevent Ukraine from ever becoming a threat, so its most likely approach is an overwhelming attack to destroy Ukraine’s military, inflict casualties and swiftly force President Volodymyr Zelensky to accede to Kremlin demands, without necessarily trying to occupy territory. Anything less than a formidable air attack would be unlikely to achieve Russia’s goals, Lee added.

Russia could also take the opportunity to seize a small piece of territory of strategic importance — for example, the coastline along the Sea of Azov, which would provide a land bridge from mainland Russia to Crimea (which was annexed from Ukraine in 2014), or a swath of territory farther into Ukraine that holds a canal that once supplied Crimea with water.

Andrew S. Weiss, vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, said that beyond the issue of NATO membership, Russia’s goals could include changing the government in Kyiv or causing it to fall apart. He said a “shock and awe” air campaign could be “a way for Russia to achieve multiple ends without getting involved in a costly, open-ended occupation.”

Weiss said, “There is a really serious threat that this is about being able to accomplish regime change without a ground war, because the current government in Kyiv looks very unstable at a moment of national peril.”

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HEADLINE	01/22 Calif. Big Sur wildfire forces evacuations
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/01/22/california-fire-big-sur-highway-evacuations/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/01/22/california-fire-big-sur-highway-evacuations/</a>

A wildfire in California's Big Sur region was burning Saturday near the Pacific coastline and Highway 1, prompting evacuation orders in Monterey County, officials said.

The Colorado Fire, which started Friday in Palo Colorado Canyon, had burned about 1,500 acres in the hours after evacuation orders were issued by the Monterey County Sheriff's Office, said Michael Meddles, assistant chief with Cal Fire in Monterey County. The blaze is 5 percent contained, he added.

Jim Shivers, a spokesman with the California Department of Transportation, [announced](#) that a stretch of iconic Highway 1 was closed in both directions due to the fire, which is located north of the Bixby Bridge and near the Palo Colorado section of Monterey County.

"Please drive safely and be aware of all emergency responders," the agency tweeted.

Officials said the evacuation orders were in effect for "all areas West of 3800 Palo Colorado Rd. to Highway 1 and south to Bixby Creek," but it remains unclear how many residents are affected by the blaze. About 430,000 people live in Monterey County.

"The sheriff's office went down there and moved everyone out," Meddles said.

No injuries or deaths had been reported as of early Saturday. The cause of the fire is under investigation.

Dry northeast winds pushed the fire toward Highway 1, according to the [National Weather Service](#). The Weather Service had issued a [wind advisory](#) in the San Francisco Bay area for Friday night through Saturday morning, with meteorologists noting that stronger winds were more likely at higher elevations.

Thirteen agencies are responding to the fire, according to [KCRA](#). The Monterey County Office of Emergency Services is monitoring the situation.

Cal Fire [tweeted](#) that the fire could be [seen](#) about 70 miles away in Santa Cruz County.

Videos and photos shared to social media showed how the Colorado Fire remained largely uncontained along the scenic coastline early Saturday.

"The fire is running up the top of the mountain," said one observer who posted a video of the fire to Twitter.

The wildfire is the latest to burn across California in the past year. The Dixie Fire was the second-largest in California's history and the biggest to burn in the United States last summer, as climate change turbocharged [severe storms, floods and fires](#). More than 1,300 structures were leveled, causing government agencies to dole out roughly \$540 million to battle the blaze. The Dixie Fire burned nearly 1 million acres, an area larger than New York City, Chicago, Dallas and Los Angeles combined.

California's shifting weather patterns have presented new threats to Highway 1, a California spectacle that features stunning beauty along its 650-mile route.

One of the most serious blazes in recent years was the 2016 Soberanes Fire along Highway 1 just south of Carmel-by-the-Sea, about 75 miles outside of San Jose. The fire burned nearly 60 homes and killed a bulldozer operator, and it was among the most expensive fires to fight in state history at the time.

Shivers told The Post that there was "no estimated time for reopening" Highway 1.

The state has experienced exceptional drought, which brought moisture levels in California's forests to historic lows, as well as searing heat. Recent rains have helped reduce some of the drought in the state. Humidity levels in the area are in the teens and wind gusts are around 35 mph, according to the Weather Service.

	<p>More than 1,000 customers with PG&amp;E, the state's public utility, were experiencing power outages from Los Padres National Forest to Carmel as of late Friday, <a href="#">KRON</a> reported.</p> <p>The Red Cross has set up a shelter at Carmel Middle School, officials said. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals also announced that it is providing emergency pet supplies at the shelter.</p> <p>The Weather Service said a wind shift Saturday was expected to push some of the smoke and haze from the Colorado Fire toward the Monterey Peninsula and Salinas.</p> <p>Meddles praised the efforts of first responders and said more work was needed to figure out how to contain the blaze along Highway 1.</p> <p>"As daylight hits, we can get an aircraft overhead to do better mapping of the fire," he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Dry January impact on California's drought</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/us/california-drought-rainfall.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/us/california-drought-rainfall.html</a>
GIST	<p>In the final three months of 2021, hope arrived in California in the form of rain.</p> <p>Record-breaking downpours nourished the parched land. The state's snowpack, a major source of water, <a href="#">reached a staggering 160 percent of its expected level</a>.</p> <p>If the rains continued through the rest of the winter, experts advised, California's severe drought could soon start to look very different.</p> <p>But alas.</p> <p>January, typically one of the state's wettest months, has proved unusually dry. And the odds now favor less-than-average rainfall through the rest of winter, said Daniel Swain, a climate scientist at the University of California, Los Angeles.</p> <p>"We're definitely still in the drought in California, and we almost certainly will be in a drought over the rest of the year," Swain told me. "We may have seen most of our precipitation that we're going to see this year."</p> <p>Despite the recent storms, state officials are pleading with Californians to save water as <a href="#">reservoirs continue to run low</a>. This month, they <a href="#">announced \$500 daily penalties</a> for people who water their lawns after rainfall or allow runoff into the streets.</p> <p>Back in the fall, climate experts were predicting that La Niña conditions would <a href="#">probably bring dry weather to California</a> this winter and exacerbate our drought. But then we got a soggy surprise.</p> <p>Between October and December, California received more rainfall than it had over the previous 12 months. Atmospheric rivers <a href="#">shattered rainfall records</a>, flooded streets and downed power lines across the state.</p> <p>Before the storms, 88 percent of California was considered in extreme or exceptional drought, the most severe designations. Now, 1 percent of the state falls into those categories, <a href="#">according to the U.S. Drought Monitor</a>.</p> <p>That's a marked improvement, but California still needs a lot more rain to make up for years of water shortfalls. Even after the storms, 99 percent of the state remains in some level of drought.</p> <p>And if January is any indication, the rest of winter doesn't seem likely to offer significant relief.</p>

Of course, we don't know for sure how rainy February and March are going to be. California often experiences unpredictable swings in weather patterns, even more so [in recent years](#).

But three largely dry weeks of January have already begun to diminish some of the benefits from our wet December.

On Dec. 30, the Sierra snowpack was estimated to be about 160 percent of average for that time of year. On Thursday, the snowpack was down to 113 percent of the historical average for that date, [according to state data](#).

There are two factors at play here: California's snowpack typically grows through January, so the historical average is higher now than it was in December. Plus, the precipitation that had accumulated in the snowpack may be starting to melt because of unseasonably warm temperatures.

Swain, the U.C.L.A. scientist, said he anticipated that the snowpack could drop below the historical average by the end of January.

In other words, the water gains in December were important — on Thursday, the [state said water districts would get more supply](#) than originally planned because of the recent deluges — but they didn't change the big picture.

"The good news is that we're guaranteed to be better off than last spring," Swain told me. "The bad news is that we may have seen most of the drought improvement we're going to see this year."

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HEADLINE	01/21 FDA expands approval of remdesivir
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/world/remdesivir-fda-approval-expanded-covid.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/world/remdesivir-fda-approval-expanded-covid.html</a>
GIST	<p>The Food and Drug Administration on Friday <a href="#">expanded the approved use of remdesivir</a>, the infused antiviral medication from Gilead Sciences that has been widely used for hospitalized Covid patients since the early days the pandemic.</p> <p>The drug is now also approved for high-risk Covid patients who are not sick enough to be hospitalized. That is the same group of patients that are eligible for monoclonal antibody infusions and antiviral pills, which are in very short supply.</p> <p>While a limited number of hospitals and clinics have already been administering remdesivir to non-hospitalized patients on an off-label basis, the agency's move may encourage more doctors to consider the drug for these patients.</p> <p>Still, the expanded approval of remdesivir is not likely to alleviate <a href="#">widespread Covid treatment shortages</a>, in large part because it is difficult to administer. The treatment must be given via intravenous infusion over three consecutive days, generally at a hospital or clinic. That is easy enough for patients who are hospitalized, but much harder to do for medically vulnerable patients who are ill and at home. Doctors who are already overwhelmed by the Omicron surge have said the treatment is difficult to launch amid widespread staffing shortages.</p> <p>Remdesivir, which in <a href="#">October 2020</a> became the first Covid treatment to win full approval, generated intense interest early in the pandemic, but many experts grew skeptical of its benefits for hospitalized patients. The data supporting its use in patients earlier in their illness are stronger.</p> <p>In clinical trial results <a href="#">published in December</a>, remdesivir was found to reduce the risk of hospitalization and death by 87 percent when given to unvaccinated, high-risk Covid patients in the United States and Europe within seven days of the start of symptoms. That study was conducted before the emergence of the Delta and Omicron variants, but remdesivir has been found in laboratory experiments to remain potent against Omicron.</p>

Unlike monoclonal antibodies and antiviral pills, which are distributed to states by the federal government, remdesivir is available for ordering on the commercial market. The drug is priced at \$2,080 per treatment course at the dosage required for non-hospitalized adults.

Remdesivir, which Gilead sells under the brand name Veklury, has been given to more than 10 million Covid patients, [Gilead said on Friday](#). The company is starting a safety study of a pill form of remdesivir that would sidestep the challenges created by having to infuse it.

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HEADLINE	01/21 'Zero-Covid' shakes Hong Kong economy
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/business/hong-kong-covid-supply-chain.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/business/hong-kong-covid-supply-chain.html</a>
GIST	<p>HONG KONG — Perry Lam felt confident that his business had weathered the worst of the pandemic. Several rounds of bar closures in Hong Kong had dimmed the city's vibrant nightlife, threatening to destroy his brewery. But things seemed better late last year.</p> <p>After the government's relentless effort to stamp out the virus, there were no local infections, bars began ordering kegs of his lager again and money was coming in. "You saw the silver lining," said Mr. Lam, 34.</p> <p>That changed this month when Omicron started spreading, and officials returned to the trusted zero-Covid playbook that Hong Kong shares with mainland China. Restaurants were forced to shut down by 6 p.m. Small animals were <a href="#">culled</a>. Flights from eight countries were <a href="#">suspended</a>. Imports came to a standstill.</p> <p>Hong Kong is chasing the same dogged virus strategy as China, hoping this will strengthen ties to Beijing and allow it to declare victory over <a href="#">Covid-19</a>. But in the process, a place once known as "Asia's World City" has cut itself off from the outside world, crushing an economy reliant on international trade at a time when the global supply chain is already deeply strained.</p> <p>Now, local businesses that held on through several outbreaks are trembling as their highflying metropolitan hub transforms into what feels more like another isolated Chinese city.</p> <p>Hong Kong has reported around 300 cases of Omicron, most detected from overseas visitors during their quarantine. In recent days, however, local infections have jumped and emerged from unexpected origins, putting health officials on edge. In all, it has recorded 13,096 virus cases and 213 deaths since the start of the pandemic.</p> <p>These low numbers have been too much for Beijing's zero-tolerance line, a seeming prerequisite for Hong Kong to reopen its border with the rest of China — a top priority for local officials who are under pressure to make the former British colony more like the mainland.</p> <p>The fallout for local business has been staggering. Economists at Wall Street banks have lowered their estimates of the city's economic growth for the year. Fitch, the ratings agency, warned that the ban on foreign travel would severely threaten Hong Kong's economic future.</p> <p>In the days after the city announced its latest virus measures, several small businesses, including a rotisserie chicken chain, a popular wine bar, a craft beer shop and a gastro pub, said that they would close. Mr. Lam said he is determined that H.K. Lovecraft, his brewery, is not next.</p> <p>"I've tried to hold out as long as possible," he said, "but we are losing money."</p> <p>Just a few years ago when he was studying to become a brewmaster in Germany, Mr. Lam had much bigger dreams: "I wanted to have something that belongs to Hong Kong, that is locally made," he said.</p>

He returned to the city and with his own money built a brewery with special equipment shipped from Germany. If he had known what was to come, he might have waited, he said. "It seems like it's not getting any better and there have been times when I have been pondering how we should proceed."

Even before the latest round of virus measures in Hong Kong, the cost of shipping malts and hops had become a challenge for many brewers. When the pandemic put pressure on the global supply chain, prices soared.

Ships stuffed with raw materials remain stuck at sea. There are more delivery trucks than there are drivers.

Ian Jebbitt, who started a Hong Kong brewery called Gweilo Beer in 2015 with his wife and a friend, said before the pandemic he used to pay around €2,000 for a container of hops. "I just agreed to pay €15,500," he said, or more than \$17,500.

The rising costs of goods, rent and labor, as well as the lockdown measures, have made Hong Kong one of the hardest markets to operate in, said Mr. Jebbitt, who has expanded his business to other markets, including Britain and Australia. "I am surprised there haven't been more casualties."

The Hong Kong Association of Freight Forwarding and Logistics said the city's 21-day quarantine and the effort to stamp out Omicron have created a deficit of aircrew that will most likely cause prices to go up by 30 to 40 percent in the coming weeks.

Carrie Lam, the city's chief executive, has acknowledged the problem and warned that the cost will be felt by everyone. "We almost have no goods entering via cargo flight," she said last week.

Motorino, a popular pizzeria with two locations in the city, is running out of tomato sauce.

A pallet of the sauce left Naples, Italy several months ago, but has been delayed four times, said Syed Asim Hussain, a co-founder of Black Sheep Restaurants, the group that owns Motorino and 28 other restaurants.

The number of diners is dwindling, too.

When he calculated his daily revenue across all restaurants after the new pandemic restrictions were announced, Mr. Hussain said it was less than what one of his restaurants brought in at lunchtime just a month ago.

In the background, Hong Kong is still navigating the aftermath of the 2019 pro-democracy protests that divided the city and his 1,000 employees.

At Carbone, another one of Mr. Hussain's Italian restaurants, December was punctuated by farewell dinners for people leaving the city, rather than raucous holiday parties. "No one in business school teaches you how to deal with two black swan events like this," he said.

Another obstacle to relaxing Covid-19 restrictions is the city's vaccination rate, which is low compared with many developed countries. Only 70 percent of residents are fully vaccinated, with many saying they are suspicious of the government.

The estimated loss for the current virus measures, which are expected to last for several more weeks, is at least \$1.2 billion over a four-week period, according to Tommy Cheung, a legislative councilor who represents the catering sector in Hong Kong.

"This isn't going away like SARS," he said, referring to the coronavirus that devastated Hong Kong in 2003 and helped shape the city's response to Covid-19. "This is one tunnel where I don't see the light at the end. All these restaurants that ask me to their ribbon cutting, I keep saying that, 'You guys are too damn brave.'"



	<p>Mrs. Lam last week announced a \$500 million pandemic relief fund for restaurants, retailers and travel agencies, but many businesses say it won't be enough.</p> <p>Rob Cooper, who owns four restaurants under the Enoteca Group, said he received four rounds of government support between November 2020 and May 2021, but managed to break even in this year only because of generous landlords and some savings.</p> <p>Now that fewer chefs and other restaurant workers are willing to move to Hong Kong and brave the quarantine, he's unsure he'll be able to survive another outbreak under the zero-Covid policy.</p> <p>"We'll never open up," Mr. Cooper said. "The next variant is around the corner. That's just science, isn't it? How do you open up an economy if everything is imported? The rest of the world is riddled with Omicron."</p> <p>For Mr. Hussain, a fifth-generation Hong Konger, losing the small mom-and-pop restaurants, diners and outdoor eateries that make his home so vibrant will irrevocably change the city.</p> <p>"The old-timers assure me that we are going to be OK. But I worry as a restaurateur, as an entrepreneur," he said. "I worry about the soul of the city."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 CDC: boosters keep infected out hospitals</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/health/covid-boosters-cdc-omicron.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=Health">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/health/covid-boosters-cdc-omicron.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=Health</a>
GIST	<p>Booster shots of the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines are not just reducing the number of infections with the highly contagious Omicron variant, they're also keeping infected Americans out of hospitals, according to data published on Friday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>The extra doses are 90 percent effective at preventing hospitalization with the variant, the agency reported. Booster shots also reduce the likelihood of a visit to an emergency department or urgent care clinic. The data also showed that extra doses are most beneficial against infection and death among Americans ages 50 and older.</p> <p>Over all, the new research indicates that the vaccines are more protective against the Delta variant than against Omicron, which lab studies have found is partially able to sidestep the body's immune response.</p> <p>"These reports add more evidence to the importance of being up-to-date with Covid vaccinations," Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the C.D.C., said at a White House briefing on Friday.</p> <p>While data from Israel and other countries have suggested that boosters can help prevent severe illness and hospitalization, at least in older adults, it had not been clear that the extra doses would have this effect in the United States, where patterns of vaccination and immunity differ from those elsewhere in the world.</p> <p>The three studies published on Friday are by far the most comprehensive and reliable assessments of the role booster shots are playing in the U.S. pandemic. The researchers reviewed millions of cases, as well as tens of thousands of hospitalizations and deaths, as the Delta and Omicron variants each came to prominence.</p> <p>"These numbers should be very convincing," Akiko Iwasaki, an immunologist at Yale University, said of the figures released on Friday.</p> <p>The detailed reports arrived along with hints that the Omicron surge may be receding. The nation is reporting 736,000 new cases daily, down from more than 800,000 last week, and hospital admissions have declined.</p>



Yet the virus continues to spread in many states, and more than 2,000 deaths still occur on many days.

Two of the studies were published in the C.D.C.'s Morbidity and Mortality Report. In [one study](#), researchers analyzed hospitalizations and visits to emergency departments and urgent care clinics in 10 states from Aug. 26, 2021, to Jan. 5, 2022.

Vaccine effectiveness against hospitalization with the Omicron variant fell to just 57 percent in people who had received their second dose more than six months earlier, the authors found. A third shot restored that protection to 90 percent.

The [second study](#) looked at nearly 10 million Covid cases and more than 117,000 associated deaths recorded at 25 state and local health departments between April 4 and Dec. 25, 2021.

Cases and deaths were lower among people who had received a booster dose, compared with those who were fully vaccinated but did not receive a booster, and much lower than the rates seen among unvaccinated people, the researchers reported.

Booster doses provided much larger gains in protection among people ages 65 and older, followed by those ages 50 to 64, the study found. The researchers did not offer data on the benefits of the shots in younger people.

In the third [study, published in the journal JAMA](#), data from more than 70,000 people who sought testing showed that a third dose provided more protection against symptomatic infection than two doses or none. Full vaccination and boosters were less protective against the Omicron variant than against Delta.

On Thursday night, the C.D.C. published additional data on its website showing that in December, unvaccinated Americans 50 years and older [were about 45 times more likely to be hospitalized than those who were vaccinated and got a third shot](#).

Together, the studies make a powerful case that boosters are a valuable defense against Omicron. Yet less than 40 percent of fully vaccinated Americans who are eligible for a booster shot [have received one](#).

It's too soon to know whether protection from the extra shots might wane, noted Natalie Dean, a biostatistician at Emory University.

"We just have to recognize that all these estimates of Omicron third-dose protection are going to be people who are pretty recently boosted," she said.

The C.D.C. now recommends booster shots [for everyone 12 years and older](#), five months after getting two doses of the mRNA vaccines made by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna, or two months after a single dose of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

When debating booster shot recommendations for all American adults, scientific advisers to the Food and Drug Administration and the C.D.C. repeatedly bemoaned the lack of data specific to the United States.

There are differences between Israel and the United States — for example, in the way [Israel defines severe illness](#) — that made it challenging to interpret the relevance of Israeli data for Americans, they said.

Some members of the Biden administration supported the use of booster doses even before the scientific advisers of the agencies had a chance to review the data from Israel. Federal health officials intensified the boosters-for-all campaign after the arrival of the Omicron variant.

The usefulness of booster shots in Americans younger than 50 was a topic of vigorous debate in the fall. Several experts argued at the time that [third shots were unnecessary](#) for younger adults because two doses of the vaccine were holding up well.

	<p>Some of those experts remained unconvinced by the new data.</p> <p>It was clear even months ago that older adults and those with weakened immune systems would benefit from extra doses of the vaccine, said Dr. Paul Offit, director of the Vaccine Education Center at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia and a member of the F.D.A.’s vaccine advisory committee.</p> <p>But “where is the evidence that a third dose benefits a healthy young person?” he asked.</p> <p>“If you’re trying to stop the spread of this virus, vaccinate the unvaccinated,” he added. “We keep trying to further protect the already protected.”</p> <p>But other experts <a href="#">changed their minds</a> in favor of boosters with the arrival of the highly contagious Omicron variant. Even if two doses were enough to keep young people out of hospitals, they said, a third dose could limit the spread of the virus by preventing infections.</p> <p>“They’re both data-driven, legitimate positions,” said John Moore, a virologist at Weill Cornell Medicine in New York.</p> <p>But at this point, the debate is over: “We are using boosters in everyone, and that’s what’s happening.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 Inflation wiping out most pay raises</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/01/22/wages-inflation/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/01/22/wages-inflation/</a>
GIST	<p>Ty Stehlik, who works the front desk at a hotel in Milwaukee, pleaded for a raise all through the pandemic — and finally got an extra \$1 an hour in the fall to make \$15.</p> <p>But higher prices for rent and food have completely negated that 7 percent bump. Stehlik, who identifies as nonbinary, says they’re still relying on family for help covering rent and groceries.</p> <p>“That raise meant nothing,” said Stehlik, 23, whose roommate works at the same hotel. “I’ve got student loans. My roommate’s got medical debt. Most of my co-workers work two or three jobs, and they’re still having difficulty making ends meet.”</p> <p>After years of barely budging, wage growth is finally at its highest level in decades. A global pandemic, combined with swift government stimulus and unexpected labor shortages have put workers in the driver’s seat, giving them the kind of negotiating power they had never imagined.</p> <p>But in an unexpected twist, the same strong economic recovery that is emboldening workers is also driving up inflation, leaving most Americans with less spending power than they had a year ago.</p> <p>Although average hourly wages rose 4.7 percent last year, overall wages fell 2.4 percent on average for all workers, when adjusted for inflation, according to the Labor Department.</p> <p>The only sector where pay increases outpaced inflation last year was in the leisure and hospitality industry, where workers generally make the lowest hourly wages of any sector. Workers there saw a 14 percent average raise from about \$17 an hour to more than \$19.50, according to an analysis of Labor Department data.</p> <p>In interviews with more than a dozen workers, many said that despite considerable pay raises — as much as 33 percent, in some cases — they were still struggling to cover basic expenses. Several workers said they had taken second jobs to keep up with rising costs for groceries, gas and rent. And many said their budgets will be even more strained once student loan payments resume in May.</p>

Devon Norris works as a culinary arts high school teacher and in the months since the pandemic began, his annual salary has increased by more than 20 percent to \$47,500.

Norris says it's still next to impossible to find an apartment in Jacksonville, Fla., that he can afford on his own. His basic expenses — food, gas, utilities, car insurance — have all ballooned in the past year. He pays \$950 in monthly rent for a 2-bedroom house, but he has been asked to move out so his landlord can sell the house. Comparable rentals in the area, he says, easily cost double what he was paying.

Norris, a former restaurant manager, has begun taking part-time jobs at restaurants to make ends meet.

"I make the most money I've ever made, but I'm still broke and struggling," he says. "I never saw myself being 37 and needing a roommate."

Inflation rose 7 percent last year, to its highest level in four decades, as supply chain disruptions and labor shortages collided with growing demand from U.S. consumers. Gas prices are up 50 percent from a year ago, while the price of meat, fish and eggs is up nearly 13 percent, according to the U.S. consumer price index.

But inflation and wage growth can become intertwined. Most economists consider this round of wage growth a natural result of the strong economic recovery, as well as competition for workers, but some worry the cycle of high inflation and demand for higher wages can become self-reinforcing, as they were during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

If consumers and businesses start expecting inflation to continue for a long time, each side will keep trying to outbid the other — businesses by charging higher prices and workers by asking for higher pay — fueling yet more inflation.

Federal Reserve Chair Jerome H. Powell said last week that he is not yet seeing evidence of such a "wage-price spiral" but that the Fed is watching these trends closely as it prepares to combat inflation with interest rate rises this year.

More critically, the big question is whether overall wage growth amounted to a one-time increase or the start of a period of more sustained wage growth — particularly for the economy's lowest-paid workers.

"The question is: How much of a deceleration will we see in wage growth this year?" said Nick Bunker, an economist at Indeed Hiring Lab. "A lot of those very strong gains were driven by the reopening, a surge of demand following the rollout of vaccines last spring, and households' strong balance sheets. But the outlook for 2022 is very unclear."

While the lowest earning workers have seen the fastest wage growth in recent years — partly the result of cities, states and major employers raising their minimum wages — economists say that dynamic could change this year. Wages are beginning to tick up in white-collar industries that rely heavily on foreign workers and are struggling to recruit enough employees given the slowdown in immigration during the pandemic, according to Nela Richardson, chief economist for payroll software provider ADP.

A recent report by the Conference Board found that U.S. businesses plan to raise wages by an average 3.9 percent this year, the fastest rate since 2008, with higher pay for new hires and inflation being cited as the main reasons behind those hikes.

"Where we're starting to see wage pressures now is in professional business services, finance and information technology, where the talent war is strong and growing," she said, adding that wages are growing fastest in the Northeast and along the West coast, where finance and tech workers tend to be concentrated.

Those workers, she said, are also more likely to receive noncash compensation like restricted stock or stock options, which have benefited from the stock market boom.

	<p>In Forest City, Pa., the helmet factory where Jennifer Matarese works recently raised wages from about \$14 an hour to \$20 to keep up with other warehouses in the area.</p> <p>“We worked for two years through this pandemic, but they only gave out pay raises once they realized, ‘Oh no, everyone is going to leave if we don’t give them more money,’ ” said Matarese, 44, who also works part-time at a dog camp and is using the extra money to pay down credit card debt she’s amassed during the pandemic. “It’s really hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel.”</p> <p>Nicole Chocie, a graphic designer in West Virginia, makes 7 percent more than she did before the pandemic. But her costs have gone up too: She’s spending \$100 more on groceries each month and an extra \$25 to fill up her tank every week. The mortgage on the home she shares with her husband near Steubenville, Ohio, has also ticked up, thanks to higher insurance costs.</p> <p>“Our house payment, insurance, food, gas — all of those things have gone up by at least 7 percent,” the 45-year-old said. “I’m in a situation where I’m able to survive but there’s no extra money for vacations or to spend on our nieces and nephews.”</p> <p>To offset soaring meat costs, she and her extended family are planning to pool their money to buy an entire cow, to keep them from buying meat at the grocery for months.</p> <p>“It’s going to cost us \$1,200 to \$1,800 for the cow, plus we’ve got to buy a freezer,” she said. “But that’s the kind of thing we’re having to do to save a couple of pennies here and there.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/22 Defend Chernobyl during an invasion?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/22/world/europe/chernobyl-ukraine-invasion-russia.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/22/world/europe/chernobyl-ukraine-invasion-russia.html</a>
GIST	<p>CHERNOBYL, Ukraine — Ukrainian soldiers, Kalashnikov rifles slung over their shoulders, patrolled through a silent, snowy forest, passing homes so long abandoned that vines twirl through the broken windows.</p> <p>The fields are fallow, the cities deserted and the entire Chernobyl zone in northern Ukraine is still so radioactive it would seem the last place on Earth anybody would want to conquer.</p> <p>But while most of the attention around a potential invasion by Russia is focused on troop buildups and daily hostilities in the east, the shortest route from Russia to Ukraine’s capital, Kyiv, is from the north. And it passes through the isolated zone around the Chernobyl power plant, where the meltdown of a reactor in 1986 caused the worst nuclear disaster in history.</p> <p>In one of the incongruities of war, that makes Chernobyl an area that Ukraine thinks it needs to defend, forcing its military to deploy security forces into the eerie and still radioactive forest, where they carry both weapons and equipment to detect radiation exposure.</p> <p>“It doesn’t matter if it is contaminated or nobody lives here,” said Lt. Col. Yuri Shakhraichuk of the Ukrainian border guard service. “It is our territory, our country, and we must defend it.”</p> <p>The Ukrainian forces in the area, known as the Chernobyl <a href="#">Exclusion Zone</a>, would not be sufficient to rebuff an invasion, if one came; they are there mostly to detect warning signs. “We collect information about the situation along the border” and convey it to Ukraine’s intelligence agencies, Colonel Shakhraichuk said.</p> <p>The concept of the Chernobyl <a href="#">Exclusion Zone</a> when Soviet authorities established it three decades ago was to limit, through isolation, the lethality of the accident at the nuclear plant. Radioactive particles left in the soil or trapped under the containment structure of the destroyed reactor while they slowly decay would</p>

pose little risk to soldiers, as long as those soldiers did not linger in highly irradiated areas. But the land must be abandoned, in some places for hundreds of years.

Two months ago, the government deployed additional forces into the area, because of increased tensions with Russia and Belarus, a Kremlin ally whose border is five miles from the stricken reactor and where Russia has recently moved troops.

“How can this be?” said Ivan Kovalchuk, a Ukrainian firefighter who helped extinguish the fire at the plant in the first days after the accident, risking his life alongside Russians and people from around the former Soviet Union. He said he was outraged that Russia could potentially menace the zone militarily.

“We liquidated the accident together,” Mr. Kovalchuk said. “For them to do this to us now just makes me feel sorry for people” in Ukraine, he said.

The Chernobyl nuclear power plant’s reactor No. 4 exploded and burned during a test on April 26, 1986, releasing about [400 times more radiation than the bombing at Hiroshima](#). Thirty people died in the immediate aftermath of the accident, most from radiation exposure; studies of longer-term health effects have been mostly inconclusive but suggest that there could eventually be thousands of deaths from cancer.

While the zone is uninhabitable, it does draw tourists for short visits, generating some income, and is seen in Ukraine as a teachable moment on recent history.

At the time of the accident, Ukraine was a Soviet republic, and initially, the Soviet authorities tried to cover up the disaster. To avoid raising suspicions, they went ahead a few days later with May Day parades in Ukraine, marching schoolchildren through swirling radioactive dust.

This callous attitude helped stir anti-Soviet sentiment throughout Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, the republics most affected, and the accident is now seen as one cause of the collapse of the Soviet Union five years later.

The Chernobyl zone covers about 1,000 square miles straddling the shortest direct route from the Belarusian border to Kyiv. While it is not necessarily the most likely invasion route from the north, because it is swampy and densely forested, Ukraine has not ruled it out.

Before last fall, the 700 miles of border between Ukraine and Belarus were almost unguarded, particularly in the irradiated areas. About 90 miles of the border separates the Ukrainian zone from a similarly isolated and irradiated area in Belarus, called the Polesie State Radioecological Reserve.

That changed in November amid a migrant crisis in Belarus and a troop buildup in Russia.

The two developments were ominous in combination. Moscow began massing troops in a way that suggested plans for an incursion into Ukraine via Belarus. Kyiv also feared that Belarus might create a provocation such as herding migrants toward the Ukrainian border — as Belarus did with Poland — and provide the spark for war.

Ukraine responded by deploying 7,500 additional guards to the Belarusian border. Colonel Shakhraichuk, of the border service, said he could not disclose how many went specifically to Chernobyl. But fears about an incursion from Belarus have only grown this week as Russia directs troops and equipment there ahead of planned joint exercises with Belarus in February.

Only a dozen or so soldiers were visible in the border area on a recent visit, but officials said others were patrolling elsewhere.

The zone is a sorrowful place to work. In the days after the accident, about 91,000 people were evacuated with just hours’ notice.

In the largest city, Pripyat, now a ghost town, a propaganda sign still extols the virtues of civilian nuclear energy. “Let the atom be a worker not a soldier,” it reads.

The risk of a war further spreading radiation seems minimal. But one object in the zone is particularly vulnerable: a new, \$1.7 billion stainless steel arch over the destroyed reactor, paid for mostly by the United States and about 30 other countries. It was completed in 2016 to prevent the spread of highly radioactive dust.

The town of Chernobyl is still partially occupied by workers who live there during rotations. They maintain the containment structure over the damaged reactor, roads and other infrastructure.

“It’s bad, it’s scary,” Elena Bofsunovska, a clerk at a grocery store, said of the possibility of military action near the destroyed reactor.

“We don’t know what will kill us first, the virus, radiation or war,” Oleksei Prishepa, a worker who was standing at the store’s counter, said with a shrug.

Mr. Prishepa said he would prefer that Ukraine set up the defensive lines further south, giving the irradiated zone over to whomever might want it. “It’s a wasteland,” he said. “No crop will ever grow here.”

Before the Russian buildup, the main security concern in Chernobyl was illegal mushroom picking and collection of scrap metal, activities that risk spreading radiation outside the zone. Police also regularly detain thrill seekers entering illegally for sightseeing.

Most of the time, soldiers on patrol face little risk from radiation. But longer-lived particles remain, creating invisible, lethally dangerous hot spots in the forest. Some emit levels of radiation thousands of times higher than normal. The soldiers have marked routes to avoid these places, which were long ago mapped by scientists.

Still, while patrolling in the zone, the soldiers must carry devices on a lanyard around their necks that continuously monitor exposure; under the protocols for patrolling in the zone, if a soldier stumbles into a highly irradiated patch, he is taken off duty to avoid further exposure.

So far, none of the border guards deployed into the zone in November have been exposed to high doses, according to Colonel Shakhraichuk.

“There are very dangerous places to avoid,” said Maj. Aleksei Vegera, who serves with the Chernobyl police force. Members of that force, accustomed to working in the area, accompany border guards on patrols.

“We do try to be careful,” he said. “But, what can I say, I’m used to it.”

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HEADLINE	01/21 US, Russia measured stance Ukraine talks
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/world/europe/ukraine-russia-us-blinken-lavrov.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/world/europe/ukraine-russia-us-blinken-lavrov.html</a>
GIST	<p>GENEVA — The United States and Russia scaled back their confrontational rhetoric over Eastern European security on Friday, agreeing to extend negotiations as the Biden administration pursues a fragile diplomatic path to averting a Russian invasion of Ukraine.</p> <p>Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken told his Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov, in a hastily scheduled meeting in Geneva that the United States would provide written responses next week to Russia’s demands that the West unwind its military presence in Eastern Europe.</p>

Both sides said that the two diplomats planned to speak again after that, and they left the door open to another conversation between President Biden and President Vladimir V. Putin to try to resolve the crisis.

Even as the threat of a Russian invasion remained real, the conciliatory tone and absence of ultimatums suggested that both sides were trying to keep tensions in check and give diplomacy time to play out. And the longer negotiating timeline stood in contrast to Mr. Biden's comments two days earlier when he said he believed Mr. Putin was ready to use military force.

"We didn't expect any breakthroughs to happen today," Mr. Blinken told reporters after the meeting. "But I believe we are now on a clearer path in terms of understanding each other's concerns."

Mr. Lavrov described the talks as "a useful, honest discussion," while Mr. Blinken called them "direct, businesslike" and "not polemical." Mr. Lavrov largely refrained from the heated language that other Russian officials had used after previous discussions this month, and he told reporters that Mr. Blinken had agreed "that it is necessary to have a more reasonable dialogue."

"I hope the emotions subside a bit," Mr. Lavrov said.

Still, Friday's meeting was only one moment in a crisis, redolent of the Cold War's worst times, that has been gathering for weeks. Analysts said the risks of a Russian invasion of Ukraine had not abated, with troops, tanks and missiles continuing to be shipped across Russia toward the Ukrainian border.

Ukraine's military intelligence service estimates that 127,000 Russian troops are now deployed within attacking distance, including in Ukraine's northern neighbor, Belarus, where Belarusian and Russian forces will conduct joint military exercises next month.

Sam Charap, a Russian security analyst at the RAND Corporation, said war was still not inevitable — but that he did not see any new signs on Friday, despite the softer rhetoric, that Russia or the United States was ready to compromise on key issues that have proved intractable in previous negotiating sessions.

"It doesn't look like either side is particularly interested in moving off the positions they were on a week ago," Mr. Charap said.

Russia's demands include a legally binding agreement to halt NATO's eastward expansion, and a withdrawal of NATO troops from countries like Poland and the Baltic nations that were once aligned with or part of the Soviet Union. The United States has dismissed those proposals as nonstarters, and Mr. Blinken reiterated after Friday's meeting that Ukrainians had a "sovereign right" to "write their own future."

"There is no trade space there — none," said Mr. Blinken, who completed a whirlwind diplomatic trip to Europe on Friday, after stops in Kyiv and Berlin.

Still, Mr. Blinken said he believed there was a way to develop agreements with Russia "that ensure our mutual security." In Washington, Jen Psaki, the White House press secretary, said Mr. Biden would travel to Camp David with his national security team this weekend to discuss the situation.

"We will also continue to consult with our allies and partners and we will respond next week in writing," Ms. Psaki said.

Western officials had been watching the talks and hoping that a more measured approach would emerge. One note of optimism came from the United Nations secretary-general, António Guterres, who was asked about the prospects of a Russian invasion of Ukraine in the hours after the Blinken-Lavrov meeting had concluded.



“I am convinced it will not happen, and I strongly hope to be right,” Mr. Guterres told reporters at a news briefing at the U.N. headquarters in New York. Mr. Guterres did not explain his reasons for taking that position.

In and around Ukraine, tensions continued to rise. Russia’s ferrying of more troops, armor and advanced anti-aircraft systems toward Belarus, a Russian ally, put a growing force within range of Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital.

And the United States has authorized Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to send Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to Ukrainian forces, augmenting the Javelin anti-tank missile deliveries to Ukraine that Britain began this month. The State Department also confirmed this week that the Biden administration had approved an additional \$200 million in defensive military aid to Ukraine, atop \$450 million in the past fiscal year.

The delivery of the stinger missiles would be a potent symbolic gesture from the United States. The C.I.A. provided the weapons systems to mujahedeen fighters during the Soviet war with Afghanistan in the 1980s, allowing them to shoot down hundreds of planes and helicopters and precipitate the eventual Soviet withdrawal.

Still, after weeks of heated words, there were signs that both sides were trying to keep tensions in check and give diplomacy time. Their agreement on Friday to keep negotiating extends a run of talks that started on Dec. 30 with a phone call between Mr. Putin and Mr. Biden, and continued with a series of three meetings across Europe last week that provided no breakthroughs but kept Russia from declaring it had no choice but to use force.

It is unclear who might benefit more from a delay if Russia does eventually invade Ukraine — a decision that American officials believe Mr. Putin has not yet made. The United States might welcome more time to rally and coordinate allies and plan contingency options. But the Russians may value the appearance of an extended, good-faith diplomatic effort before any potential invasion, and may use the time to mobilize more troops.

Mr. Blinken’s acknowledgment that the United States would provide a written response to Russia’s demands was the clearest the Biden administration has been that it would fulfill this request. Senior American officials said that the Kremlin’s insistence on written responses reflects the centralized nature of a system in which Mr. Putin holds overwhelming power and the government bureaucracy has limited influence. They believe Mr. Putin wants to see America’s specific position with his own eyes.

Mr. Lavrov repeated Russia’s denials that it had any plans to attack Ukraine and said he and Mr. Blinken had agreed to speak again after the United States provided its response. Mr. Putin has warned that Russia would take unspecified “military-technical” actions to ensure its security if the West did not agree to its demands.

“I can’t say whether or not we are on the right path,” Mr. Lavrov said. “We will understand this when we get the American response on paper to all the points in our proposals.”

Mr. Biden prompted some diplomatic blowback on Wednesday when he said that a “limited incursion” by Russia into Ukraine could prompt arguments among NATO members about a proportional response. Mr. Biden clarified the comment on Thursday, insisting that any Russian military move into Ukraine would provoke “a severe and coordinated economic response.”

Mr. Blinken echoed that position on Friday. But when asked about Mr. Biden’s early-December declaration that he considered the direct involvement of American troops to be “off the table,” Mr. Blinken did not waver from that line.

“It is our determination to do everything we can to defend it and to prevent or deter aggression directly toward it,” he said of Ukraine. But because Ukraine is not a NATO member, a status which under the alliance’s Article Five would legally commit America to its military defense, Mr. Blinken made clear that

	<p>devoting American forces to a conflict is not an option. “It’s not covered by the Article Five commitment,” he said.</p> <p>U.S. officials had expressed low expectations for Mr. Blinken’s meeting with Mr. Lavrov, and in brief remarks beforehand both envoys expressed little hope for a breakthrough.</p> <p>Still Mr. Blinken has voiced some optimism. On the car ride to the meeting with Mr. Lavrov at a waterfront hotel, Mr. Blinken noted whitecaps on a blustery Lake Geneva, according to a senior State Department official. He told his colleagues that he hoped the meeting would calm the waters.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Self-made Covid experts keep popping up</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/style/amateur-covid-scientist-expert.html?action=click&amp;module=RelatedLinks&amp;pgtype=Article">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/style/amateur-covid-scientist-expert.html?action=click&amp;module=RelatedLinks&amp;pgtype=Article</a>
GIST	<p>Lauren Terry, 23, thought she would know what to do if she contracted Covid-19. After all, she manages a lab in Tucson that processes Covid tests.</p> <p>But when she developed symptoms on Christmas Eve, she quickly realized she had no inside information.</p> <p>“I first tried to take whatever rapid tests I could get my hands on,” Ms. Terry said. “I bought some over the counter. I got a free kit from my county library. A friend gave me a box. I think I tried five different brands.” When they all turned up negative, she took a P.C.R. test, but that too, was negative.</p> <p>With clear symptoms, she didn’t believe the results. So she turned to Twitter. “I was searching for the Omicron rapid test efficacy and trying to figure out what brand works on this variant and what doesn’t and how long they take to produce results,” she said. (The Food and Drug Administration has said that rapid antigen tests may be less sensitive to the Omicron variant but has not identified any specific tests that outright fail to detect it.) “I started seeing people on Twitter say they were having symptoms and only testing positive days later. I decided not to see anybody for the holidays when I read that.”</p> <p>She kept testing, and a few days after Christmas she received the result she had expected all along.</p> <p>Though it’s been almost two years since the onset of the pandemic, this phase can feel more confusing than its start, in March 2020. Even P.C.R. tests, the gold standard, don’t always detect every case, especially early in the course of infection, and there is some doubt among scientists about whether rapid antigen tests perform as well with Omicron. And, the need for a 10-day isolation period was thrown into question after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention <a href="#">announced</a> that some people could leave their homes after only five days.</p> <p>“The information is more confusing because the threat itself is more confusing,” said <a href="#">David Abramson</a>, who directs the Center for Public Health Disaster Science at the N.Y.U. School of Global Public Health. “We used to know there was a hurricane coming at us from 50 miles away. Now we have this storm that is not well defined that could maybe create flood or some wind damage, but there are so many uncertainties, and we just aren’t sure.”</p> <p>Many people are now coming to their own conclusions about Covid and how they should behave. After not contracting the virus after multiple exposures, they may conclude they can take more risks. Or if they have Covid they may choose to stay in isolation longer than the C.D.C. recommends.</p> <p>And they aren’t necessarily embracing conspiracy theories. People are forming opinions after reading mainstream news articles and tweets from epidemiologists; they are looking at real-life experiences of people in their networks.</p>

Still, this isn't the same as following scientifically tested advice from experts, Dr. Abramson said. "A lot of it is anecdotal, and to say, 'My brother-in-law did this and it worked for him, so I'm going to do it too,' that is a poor use of probabilistic thinking," he said.

And the people cobbling together their own guidance aren't always looking for shortcuts. Reagan Ross, 26, who lives in San Jose, Calif., and is completing her Ph.D in the department of communication at Stanford University, was recently asked on a date.

She had been isolating for 13 days after getting the virus, longer than the C.D.C.'s guidelines, and no longer has any symptoms. But she decided she wouldn't go on the date until she gets a negative antigen test.

"Some of my family members think I'm crazy," she said. "But my date understands. He is not interested in getting Covid."

(Dr. Abramson said you can't go wrong by being too cautious. "If you are very cautious the odds are with you," he said.)

Alexa Winter, 18, who works for Nordstrom Rack and lives in Minneapolis, wanted to stay home for the correct number of days, but she was confused about what that was after reading the [C.D.C. website](#). "I looked at the official C.D.C. guidelines, but it was so muddled," she said. "I couldn't tell if it was five days or 10 days."

Dr. Abramson said the five-day guidance "has too much ambiguity." "I would have preferred much clearer guidance," he said.

Ms. Winter turned to other sources. "I asked people who I communicate with on Twitter who did lockdowns what they did and what they thought I should do," she said. "I asked my mom and dad what they thought. I asked friends of mine who had Covid before."

Vince Hulett, 35, who works in digital marketing and lives in Ballwin, Mo., believes it is his combination of vaccines — two Pfizer shots and a Moderna booster — that has protected him against Covid thus far. He decided to get a different booster vaccine after reading early studies that suggest the mixture may offer more protection than getting three shots of the same vaccine.

When most of his family contracted Covid over Christmas, it only made him more confident in his decision.

"I had a huge Covid outbreak in my family over Christmas. My dad and mom got it, my two daughters, my brother, his wife and their two kids," he said. He and his wife, he said, were among the few who didn't get it. "I 100 percent think my vaccine combo protected me."

Syl Tang, a futurist, said almost everyone she knows has come to her with theories about what they think is happening right now in the pandemic.

"Everybody just wants to find a way to feel good about their choices and make sense about this world we live in right now," she said.

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HEADLINE	01/22 Stocks worst start of a year since 2016
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/22/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#stocks-are-off-to-their-worst-start-of-a-year-since-2016">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/22/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#stocks-are-off-to-their-worst-start-of-a-year-since-2016</a>
GIST	After falling for a fourth day in a row on Friday, the stock market suffered its worst week in nearly two years, and so far in January the S&P 500 is off to its worst start since 2016. Technology stocks have been

hit especially hard, with the Nasdaq Composite Index dropping more than 10 percent from its most recent high, which qualifies as a correction in Wall Street talk.

That's not all. The bond market is also in disarray, with rates rising sharply and bond prices, which move in the opposite direction, falling. [Inflation](#) is red hot, and [supply chain disruptions](#) continue.

Until now, the markets looked past such issues during the pandemic, which brought big increases in the value of all kinds of assets.

Yet a crucial factor has changed, which gives some market watchers [reason to worry](#) that the recent decline may be consequential. That element is the Federal Reserve.

As the worst economic ravages of the pandemic appear to be waning, at least for now, the Fed is ushering in a return to higher interest rates. It is also beginning to withdraw some of the other forms of support that have kept stocks flying since it [intervened](#) to save desperately wounded financial markets back in early 2020.

This could be a good thing if it beats back inflation without derailing the economic recovery. But removing this support also inevitably cools the markets as investors move money around, searching for assets that perform better when interest rates are high.

"The Fed's policies basically got the current bull market started," said Edward Yardeni, an independent Wall Street economist. "I don't think they are going to end it all now, but the environment is changing and the Fed is responsible for a lot of this."

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HEADLINE	01/22 Covid cases rise, omicron cases at peak?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/22/us/omicron-cases-us-deaths.html?action=click&amp;module=RelatedLinks&amp;pgtype=Article">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/22/us/omicron-cases-us-deaths.html?action=click&amp;module=RelatedLinks&amp;pgtype=Article</a>
GIST	<p>CHICAGO — New coronavirus cases have started to fall nationally, signaling that the Omicron-fueled spike that has infected tens of millions of Americans, packed hospitals and shattered records has finally begun to relent.</p> <p>More and more states have passed a peak in new cases in recent days, as glimmers of progress have spread from a handful of eastern cities to much of the country. Through Friday, the country was averaging about 720,000 new cases a day, down from about 807,000 last week. New coronavirus hospital admissions have leveled off.</p> <p>Even as hopeful data points emerge, the threat has by no means passed. The United States continues to identify far more infections a day than in any prior surge, and some states in the West, South and Great Plains are still seeing sharp increases. Many hospitals are full. And deaths continue to mount, with more than 2,100 announced most days.</p> <p>But following a month of extraordinary rates of case growth, blocklong lines at testing centers and military deployments to bolster understaffed I.C.U.s, the declining new-case tallies offered a sense of relief to virus-weary Americans, especially in the Northeast and parts of the Upper Midwest, where the trends were most encouraging. After another round of masking up or hunkering down, some were considering what life might look like if conditions continued to improve.</p> <p>"Especially after this wave, the level of exhaustion in New York City cannot be exaggerated, and the level of numbness is quite significant," said Mark D. Levine, Manhattan's borough president. He added: "What we have to do now is not pretend like Covid has disappeared, but manage it to the point where it does not disrupt our life."</p>

In states where new cases have started to fall, the declines have so far been swift and steep, largely mirroring the rapid ascents that began in late December. Those patterns have resembled the ones seen in South Africa, the country whose scientists warned the world about Omicron, and the first place to document a major surge of the variant. New cases in South Africa have fallen 85 percent from their mid-December peak, to about 3,500 cases a day from a high of 23,400, though they remain above the levels seen in the weeks before Omicron took hold.

Scientists said it remained an open question whether Omicron marked the transition of the coronavirus from a pandemic to a less-threatening endemic virus, or whether future surges or variants would introduce a new round of tumult.

“It’s important for people to not be like, ‘Oh, it’s over,’” said Aubree Gordon, an epidemiologist at the University of Michigan. “It’s not over until we get back down to a lull. We’re not there yet.”

In New York, cases are falling sharply even as deaths continue to increase, with more fatalities being announced each day than at any point since the first months of the pandemic. Around Cleveland and in Washington, D.C., fewer than half as many new infections are being announced each day as in early January. And in Illinois and Maryland, hospitalizations and cases have started to decline.

“We are very encouraged by our substantially improving situation,” Gov. Larry Hogan of Maryland said Thursday, “but the next 10 days to two weeks are really going to be critical.”

More states in more regions continue to show signs of improvement, with Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania among those now reporting several days of sustained case declines.

But the progress is not yet universal.

Reports of new infections continue to grow in North Dakota, which is averaging four times as many cases a day than at the start of January, and in Alabama, where hospitalizations have roughly doubled over the last two weeks. Utah is averaging about 11 times as many cases a day as it was a month ago, and hospitalizations have reached record levels.

“As we’ve seen with Delta and previous surges, it comes in these peaks and waves, where one part of the U.S. gets hit and another part gets hit afterward,” said Syra Madad, an infectious-disease epidemiologist in New York City. “We are going to see that with Omicron. Even with a decline, it comes with a very long tail.”

In Kansas, where daily case rates have increased 50 percent in the past two weeks, Gov. Laura Kelly announced Friday that Veterans Affairs hospitals would be accepting patients not usually eligible for care there because other facilities were strained.

“We are at an inflection point with the Omicron variant, and the strain on our hospitals is taking a toll on our health care workers and patients — all while the virus continues to spread rapidly through our communities,” Ms. Kelly said in a statement.

Still, there is “renewed hope” that the end of the pandemic might be in sight, Dr. Bruce Vanderhoff, the director of the Ohio Department of Health, said at a news conference on Thursday.

But through nearly two years of the pandemic, the country has celebrated hopeful moments before, only to be disappointed by another wave: when the first surge in cases receded, when vaccines were authorized, when a “hot vax summer” seemed to be on the horizon.

“We need to be super vigilant about what is going on internationally,” said Judith Persichilli, the health commissioner in New Jersey, where case rates are falling quickly and where temporary morgues erected at the beginning of Omicron’s onslaught never had to be used. “Whatever is happening overseas eventually lands on our shores, and it lands first in New York and New Jersey.”

Some of the initial alarm about Omicron, which was first detected around Thanksgiving and quickly stormed across the globe, has lessened as research showed that the variant tends to cause less severe disease than prior forms of the virus. Vaccinated people, especially those who have received booster shots, are far less likely to have serious outcomes, though breakthrough infections are common. Data published on Friday from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showed that booster shots are 90 percent effective against hospitalization with Omicron.

Still, more Americans with the virus are hospitalized than at any other point of the pandemic, though deaths have so far remained below the peak levels seen a year ago. And the public case data does not include many people who test positive on at-home tests.

At-home tests have become hard to find, though Americans can now also order a limited number of those tests from the Postal Service. Private insurers are now required to cover the cost of eight tests per person each month.

There has been no return to the stay-at-home orders imposed early in the pandemic, though new restrictions have emerged in some places. Some schools and colleges have transitioned to online instruction, either as a precaution or because of major outbreaks. School closures because of the virus peaked in early January, with millions of children affected by district shutdowns and classroom quarantines. Since then, disruptions have decreased, according to Burbio, a data-tracking company.

Countless Americans have adjusted their routines in recent weeks, avoiding unnecessary outings as cases spiked.

“The timing of this in a place like Cleveland has been bad,” said Marc R. Kotora, the owner of Gust Gallucci Co., a grocer and restaurant food provider that usually sees a big uptick in business around the holidays. “Because of the Omicron variant, we had lots of cancellations for people who wanted us to help cater their parties, and a number of restaurants we sell to closed up for a few weeks.”

In Chicago, where a vaccination mandate for indoor dining and some other activities took effect early this month, officials said they could lift that requirement in the coming months if conditions continued to improve. Cook County, which includes Chicago, is averaging about 8,000 cases a day, down from 12,000 earlier in the month.

“In June, my hope is that we will be in a good place,” said Dr. Allison Arwady, the city’s public health commissioner. “But could there be another variant? Where could we be? I can’t know for sure.”

In New Jersey, where new cases are down 60 percent over the last two weeks, hospitals have resumed more outpatient services and elective surgeries in recent days as the virus burden began to ease. Some facilities have also reclaimed areas that were set aside to accommodate beds for overflow Covid patients.

“Everybody has been so resilient,” said Melissa Zak, the chief nursing officer at Virtua Memorial and Virtua Willingboro, hospitals in southern New Jersey. “But I really worry how much this resiliency can last if it doesn’t continue to come down.”

Still, after two years of watching cases spike and ebb, and with scientists warning that the virus will become endemic, some people were careful not to be too optimistic about the latest data.

“Covid-19 seems to be rapidly changing all the time now,” said Ari Glockner, a student at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. He added: “We don’t know what it is going to be like five years from now, but I would bet we are still going to be dealing with it pretty consistently.”

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SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/22/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#ireland-covid-restrictions-st-patricks-day">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/22/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#ireland-covid-restrictions-st-patricks-day</a>
GIST	<p>DUBLIN — Ireland cleared the way for its first full public celebration of St. Patrick’s Day in two years as the prime minister, Micheal Martin, announced on Friday that most Covid restrictions would end beginning on Saturday.</p> <p>“Spring is coming, and I don’t know if I have ever looked forward to one as much as this one,” said Mr. Martin. “Humans are social beings, and we Irish are more social than most. As we look forward to this spring, we need to see each other again; we need to see each other smile; we need to sing again.”</p> <p>The minister for culture, tourism and the arts, Catherine Martin, also confirmed that the nation’s St. Patrick’s Day festival would go ahead in March, after a two-year hiatus. The festival in 2020 was an early casualty of the pandemic, canceled only the weekend before St. Patrick’s Day. And last year’s celebration was canceled, too.</p> <p>The lifting of Covid restrictions will allow bars and restaurants to remain open past 8 p.m., the closing time that had been mandated in the run-up to the holiday season as Omicron cases surged.</p> <p>Customers will no longer need to show proof of vaccination or that they have had a recent infection. Nightclubs will be able to reopen, and there will be no restrictions on the number of people who can attend events, such as weddings, concerts, sporting events, or — as is traditional in Ireland — funerals. Rules that prohibited home visits between members of more than two households are also being scrapped.</p> <p>“We should all take a moment to appreciate how far we’ve come, to appreciate the effort and sacrifice of those who put themselves in harm’s way to keep us safe, to remember and appreciate the lives and contributions of those we lost,” the prime minister said.</p> <p>Ireland’s reports of new daily Covid cases have been falling. On Thursday, the nation reported 5,523 new cases, down from a peak of 26,122 on Jan. 8 during the current Omicron-fueled wave. According to <a href="#">a New York Times database</a>, 78 percent of the Irish population is fully vaccinated.</p> <p>Face masks will still be required indoors in public spaces, such as in stores and on public transportation, for at least another month. A negative Covid test is also still required for all inbound and outbound international travel. These remaining measures will be reviewed by the end of February, by which time the government hopes many more children aged 5 to 11 years old will have been fully vaccinated.</p> <p>“The pandemic isn’t over,” Mr. Martin said. “It will still require all of us to be vigilant.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 China holds the line on ‘zero-Covid’</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/world/asia/china-zero-covid-policy.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/world/asia/china-zero-covid-policy.html</a>
GIST	<p>In a glitzy Shanghai shopping district, about <a href="#">40 people who happened to be at a Uniglo store</a> were informed that they would be spending the night there. A suspected Covid case had been traced to the shop.</p> <p>Elsewhere in the same city, Anna Rudashko was told to return to an office building she had visited for a meeting the day before. She spent 58 hours there with more than 200 strangers, waiting for test results.</p> <p>Across China, in Shaanxi Province, <a href="#">Zhao Xiaoqing was on a second date</a>, visiting a man at his parents’ home, when the local authorities locked down the neighborhood. She quarantined with them for nearly 30 days. (Fortunately, she said, “I got along well with his family.”)</p> <p>China, which has largely kept the coronavirus at bay since 2020, is going to ever more extreme lengths to quell outbreaks that have proliferated around the country in recent weeks, and a growing number of people are finding their lives suddenly upended as a result.</p>



At least 20 million people in three cities were under full lockdown as recently as last week, and many more cities across the country have been subjected to partial lockdowns and mass testing. During the past month, at least 30 major Chinese cities have reported locally transmitted Covid cases.

The case numbers themselves are minuscule by global standards, and no Covid deaths have been reported in China's current wave. On Friday, [the health authorities reported a total of 23 new locally transmitted cases](#) in five cities.

But many cases have involved the highly transmissible Omicron variant, and with each passing day, the government's [dogged pursuit of "zero Covid"](#) is looking harder to achieve. Many wonder how long it can be maintained without causing widespread, lasting disruptions to China's economy and society.

"At this point, it's really almost like a last-ditch, or certainly very stubborn and persistent, effort to stave off the virus," said [Dali Yang](#), a professor of political science at the University of Chicago. "They are really stuck."

So far, the leadership has only doubled down on its strategy — which relies on mass testing, stringent border controls, extensive contact tracing and snap lockdowns — to extinguish nascent outbreaks.

Adding to the sense of urgency, 24 locally transmitted cases have been discovered in Beijing, where the [Winter Olympics](#) are set to open in two weeks. Several neighborhoods have been sealed off, and the authorities have stepped up testing requirements for entering and leaving the capital. Officials said this week that [Olympics tickets would not be sold to the public](#) because of concerns about the virus.

The authorities have suggested that the first Omicron case in Beijing may have come from a package in Canada. They have since called on people across China to use caution when opening mail from overseas. In Beijing, mail is being subjected to at least four rounds of disinfection, even though experts say the risk of contracting the virus from surfaces, especially paper or cardboard, [is very low](#).

"It sounds unlikely to me, but I wouldn't say it's impossible," said [Ben Cowling](#), an epidemiologist at the University of Hong Kong. "I would certainly suggest that the authorities keep looking in case there's other things that could maybe explain it."

Chinese officials previously [pushed the conspiracy theory](#) that the virus had been brought to Wuhan, where it first emerged, by American military personnel. More recently, the central government blamed local officials in Xi'an for disruptions of food supplies and medical care when [the city of 13 million was locked down in December](#).

"Beijing is finding it increasingly difficult to defend its Covid-zero policy," said [Lynette H. Ong](#), a professor of political science at the University of Toronto. "The costs are rising so high that they are starting to put the blame not only on local officials, but also on foreigners — it's never the central policymakers' fault."

Many in China support the zero-Covid strategy, which may have saved hundreds of thousands of lives and which has allowed most people to live fairly normally during the pandemic. But the recent outbreaks have led to frustration and grumbling as more and more people have been caught up in the virus-control dragnet.

This month, Lilian Lin, 29, was forced to suspend her modest online business selling basic goods like towels and stationery after she was locked down in her apartment in the northern city of Tianjin over a cluster of cases in the neighborhood.

To make matters worse, going home for the upcoming Lunar New Year holiday looks increasingly unlikely: Restrictions have also been imposed in her hometown, the central city of Zhengzhou.

“I know others have it worse,” said Ms. Lin, who had been in her apartment for more than 10 days and counting, with only her plants for company. “But I’m so tired of the endless lockdowns.”

In Xi’an and other cities, officials said this week that restrictions would soon be eased because case numbers were falling. But in the longer term, there is concern that China, the last major country to hold fast to a zero-Covid strategy, may have backed itself into a corner.

While more than 80 percent of the population — over 1.2 billion people — has had at least two vaccine doses, most received Chinese-made vaccines, which studies have found to [provide little defense against Omicron infections](#). Experts speculate that China’s leaders may be holding out for a more effective vaccine or therapeutic, or waiting for a milder strain of the virus to emerge.

Until then, analysts say, the increasing complaints are unlikely to persuade Beijing to change its Covid policy. Eurasia Group, a consultancy, recently put China’s zero-tolerance strategy at the top of its list of political risks for the year, suggesting that it would ultimately backfire for the country and roil the global economy.

“The most successful policy battling the virus has become the least,” wrote the [report](#)’s authors, Ian Bremmer and Cliff Kupchan.

Stories emerging from the lockdowns have ranged from the tragic, like [the people denied medical care in Xi’an](#), to the absurd and even the endearing.

[Ms. Zhao, 28, had met Zhao Fei only once](#), on a blind date, before visiting his family’s home in the city of Xianyang in Shaanxi Province last month. The authorities’ snap lockdown kept her there for four weeks and, it seems, changed both of their lives. She said he slowly won her heart, and they plan to be engaged soon.

“Lots of friends were curious about whether the blind date was a success,” a beaming Ms. Zhao said in a video on the social network Douyin last week. “Of course, it was.”

Others have had less pleasant experiences.

Ms. Rudashko, 37, of Shanghai, was getting ready for bed last Friday when she received an email from her employer. The day before, she had gone to an office building where she doesn’t work for an hourlong meeting, and now she was being told to return there for testing and a brief quarantine. Someone who had been exposed to a person with Covid had been on the same floor of the building, on a different day.

Ms. Rudashko spent that night, and the next, in the office with more than 200 people she didn’t know. For 58 hours, they played cards, watched movies, drank wine and munched on cold cuts from an Italian restaurant. Ms. Rudashko slept in a sleeping bag on a windowsill in the office kitchen. One person brought a tent; a couple brought their dog. There were no showers.

“The mood was ‘It is what it is, so let’s just make the most of it,’” Ms. Rudashko, now in the middle of a 12-day mandatory home quarantine, said by telephone.

She said the person thought to have been exposed to the virus had ultimately tested negative. The experience left Ms. Rudashko feeling that China’s Covid policy was “unrealistic.”

“They’re really trying for zero but it’s not happening,” she said. “And it just feels like there’s no end in sight.”

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HEADLINE	01/22 China staging Olympics on own terms
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/22/world/asia/winter-olympics-china-beijing-xi-jinping.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/22/world/asia/winter-olympics-china-beijing-xi-jinping.html</a>

When the International Olympic Committee met seven years ago to choose a host for the 2022 Winter Games, China's leader, Xi Jinping, sent a short video message that helped tip the scale in a close, controversial vote.

China had limited experience with winter sports. Little snow falls in the distant hills where outdoor events would take place. Pollution was so dense at times that it was known as the "Airpocalypse."

Mr. Xi pledged to resolve all of this, putting his personal prestige on what seemed then like an audacious bid. "We will deliver every promise we made," he [told](#) the Olympic delegates meeting in Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur.

With the Games only days away, China has delivered. It has plowed through the obstacles that once made Beijing's bid seem a long shot, and faced down new ones, including an unending pandemic and mounting international concern over its authoritarian behavior.

As in 2008, when Beijing was [host of the Summer Olympics](#), the Games have become a showcase of the country's achievements. Only now, it is a very different country.

China no longer needs to prove its standing on the world stage; instead, it wants to proclaim the sweeping vision of a more prosperous, more confident nation under Mr. Xi, [the country's most powerful leader](#) since Mao Zedong. Where the government once sought to mollify its critics to make the Games a success, today it defies them.

Beijing 2022 "will not only enhance our confidence in realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," said Mr. Xi, who this year is poised to claim a third term at the top. It will also "show a good image of our country and demonstrate our nation's commitment to building a community with a shared future for mankind."

Mr. Xi's government has brushed off criticism from human rights activists and world leaders as the bias of those — including President Biden — who would keep China down. It has implicitly warned Olympic broadcasters and sponsors not to bend to calls for protests or boycotts over the country's political crackdown in Hong Kong or its campaign of repression in Xinjiang, the largely Muslim region in the northwest.

It has overruled the I.O.C. in negotiations over health protocols to [combat Covid](#) and imposed stricter safety measures than those during the Summer Olympics in Tokyo last year. It has insisted on sustaining its ["zero Covid" strategy](#), evolved from China's first lockdown, in Wuhan two years ago, [regardless of the cost](#) to its economy and its people.

Very few people today harbor illusions, unlike in 2008, that the privilege of hosting the event will moderate the country's authoritarian policies. China then sought to meet the world's terms. Now the world must accept China's.

"They don't need this to legitimize their rule," said Xu Guoqi, a historian at the University of Hong Kong and author of "Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895-2008." "And they don't need to please the whole world to make the event a big success."

The I.O.C., like international corporations and entire countries, has become so dependent on China and its huge market that few can, or dare, to speak up against the direction Mr. Xi is taking the country.

China's critics, activists for human and labor rights and others have accused the committee of failing to press Mr. Xi to change the country's increasingly authoritarian policies. However, that presumes the committee has leverage to use.

When Mr. Xi's government faced an international furor after smothering [an accusation](#) of sexual assault by the tennis player Peng Shuai, a three-time Olympian, the I.O.C. did not speak out. Instead, it helped deflect concerns about her whereabouts and safety.

China's tenacious — many say ruthless — efficiency was precisely what appealed to Olympic delegates after the [staggering costs](#) of the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi, Russia, and the [white-knuckle chaos of preparations](#) for the 2016 Summer Games in Rio de Janeiro.

As Mr. Xi promised, the toxic air that once choked Beijing has largely, if not entirely, given way to [blue skies](#). High-speed [railways](#) have slashed the trip from Beijing to the most distant venues from four hours to one.

In an area perennially short of water, China built a network of pipelines to feed a phalanx of [snow-making](#) machines to dust barren slopes in white. Officials this week even [claimed](#) the entire Games would be “fully carbon neutral.”

Christophe Dubi, executive director of the upcoming Games, said in an interview that China proved to be a partner willing and able to do whatever it took to pull off the event, regardless of the challenges.

“Organizing the Games,” Mr. Dubi said, “was easy.”

The committee has deflected questions about human rights and other controversies overshadowing the Games. While the committee's own charter calls for “improving the promotion and respect of human rights,” officials have said that it was not for them to judge the host country's political system.

Instead, what matters most to the committee is pulling off the Games. By selecting Beijing, the committee had alighted on a “safe choice,” said Thomas Bach, the committee's president.

“We know China will deliver on its promises.”

### **Where Snow Seldom Falls**

Beijing's bid to become the first city to host a Summer and Winter Olympics took root when Lim Chee Wah, the scion of a Malaysian developer of casinos and golf courses, moved to a booming Beijing in the 1990s and wanted a place to ski.

He drove up winding roads northwest of Beijing for five hours to a mountainous region populated by cabbage and potato farmers. The area's only ski resort was a single wooden building with a dining room, a handful of hotel rooms and a small ski shop.

“I went out and said, ‘Where is the ski lift?’ and they said, ‘You see this road going up?’” he recalled in an interview. A Toyota Coaster minibus ferried skiers up the road to the top of the slope.

Mr. Lim, who had learned to ski in the American resort town of Vail, Colo., soon struck a deal with the local authorities to turn 24,700 acres of mostly barren hills into China's largest ski resort.

In 2009 he met with Gerhard Heiberg, Norway's representative on the executive board of the Olympic committee, who had overseen the organization of the 1994 Winter Games in Lillehammer. Together, they began envisioning how to hold the Games in the hills near the Great Wall of China.

China had previously sought the Winter Olympics, proposing to hold the 2010 Games in Harbin, the former Russian outpost that is the capital of the northeast province of Heilongjiang. The city did not even make the shortlist in a competition ultimately won in 2003 by Vancouver, British Columbia. The authorities in Harbin mulled another bid in the heady aftermath of Beijing 2008, but scrapped the idea when they seemed destined to fail again.

By then, the luster of hosting the Winter Games had worn off. Vancouver was dogged by [unseasonably warm weather](#). Sochi 2014 — intended as a valedictory of Vladimir V. Putin’s rule in Russia — cost a staggering \$51 billion.

Growing wariness of organizing the quadrennial event gave China an unexpected advantage. Beijing — no one’s idea of a winter sports capital — could reuse sites from the 2008 Games, including the iconic Bird’s Nest stadium for the opening ceremony. The Water Cube, which held the swimming and diving events 14 years ago, was rebranded as the Ice Cube.

Figure skating and short-track speedskating (which provided China its only gold medal in the 2018 Winter Games) will take place at the Capital Indoor Stadium, the venue of the “Ping-Pong diplomacy” between the United States and China in 1971 and Olympic volleyball in 2008.

China promised to spend only \$1.5 billion on capital projects at venues, plus that much in operating expenses, a fraction of the cost for Sochi or the 2018 Games in Pyeongchang, South Korea, which cost nearly \$13 billion. “When you don’t have the pressure of money the way we do in other contexts, it is really different,” said Mr. Dubi of the Olympic committee.

Even so, China’s bid seemed unlikely to succeed, especially since the 2018 Games were also taking place in Asia and officials expected the next host to be in Europe. Then one European city after another pulled out, leaving Beijing competing only against [Almaty](#), the former capital of Kazakhstan, once a republic of the Soviet Union.

The final tally was 44 to 40 for Beijing, with one abstention. Almaty’s supporters were left to fume over a [glitch](#) in the electronic voting system that prompted a manual recount to “protect the integrity of the vote.” That Kazakhstan has plunged into political turmoil on the eve of the Games seems now, in hindsight, further validation of the choice to pick Beijing.

“I don’t think it’s a stretch and I’m not being disingenuous or negative toward the Chinese — they probably would not have been victorious had some of those European cities stayed in the race,” said Terrence Burns, a marketing consultant who worked on Almaty’s bid and for Beijing when it secured the 2008 Games. “But you know what? They hung in there, and you know, winners find a way to win.”

### **An Underdog Turned Olympic Power**

With the bid in hand, Mr. Xi decreed that China would become a winter sports wonderland, even though very few in China skied. He vowed in a letter to the Olympic committee that the Games would “ignite the passion” of 300 million people.

There are now six resorts in the mountains near Chongli, a small city near Zhangjiakou, one of two Olympic clusters created in the mountains north of Beijing. They have spurred a budding interest in skiing, with 2.8 million visitors in the winter of 2018 and 2019, according to [Xinhua](#), compared to 480,000 three years before.

Mr. Lim’s resort was chosen by China’s Olympic organizers for the snowboard and freestyle skiing events.

Nearby is the venue for ski jumping, a complex built to resemble a [ceremonial scepter](#) popular in the Qing dynasty, complete with a 6,000-seat stadium at the bottom that is supposed to hold soccer matches after the Olympics.

Events that require longer, steeper slopes — the Alpine races — will take place in another cluster in the mountains near Yanqing, a district on the northern edge of greater Beijing. Creating the seven courses there required extensive blasting to chisel ski runs out of gray cliffs near the Great Wall.

At a time when climate change has created worries about whether many ski resorts may become too warm for snow, the hills northwest of Beijing do not lack for winter temperatures. What the area lacks is water and, thus, snow.

When Beijing bid, the evaluation committee raised concern that events would take place in a landscape of barren brown slopes. “There could be no snow outside of the racecourse, especially in Yanqing, impacting the visual perception of the snow setting,” the committee’s report said.

China’s solution was to build pipelines and reservoirs to supply the machines that will cover the courses in snow. (Almaty’s slogan was a subtle dig at Beijing’s plans for artificial snow: “Keeping it Real.”)

Late last month, in the village in Chongli where many athletes will stay, the machines hummed day and night to blow plumes of snow not only on the runs, but also into the woods and fields nearby to create an Alpine veneer — at least for the television cameras.

Workers have also planted tens of thousands of trees, watered by an elaborate irrigation system. Many stand in long, straight rows and look less like natural forests than giant Christmas tree farms.

### **The Olympic Helmsman**

In the months before the 2008 Olympics, Mr. Xi was put in charge of the final preparations. He had only recently joined the country’s highest political body, the Politburo Standing Committee. The role was effectively a test of his leadership potential.

He took a particular interest in [military preparations](#) for the Games, including the installation of 44 antiaircraft batteries around Beijing, even though the likelihood of an aerial attack on the city seemed far-fetched.

“A safe Olympics is the biggest symbol of a successful Beijing Olympic Games, and is the most important symbol of the country’s international image,” he said then.

Preparations for these Games reflect Mr. Xi’s style of governance. He has been at the center of each decision — from the layout of the Olympic Village in Chongli, to the brands of skis and ski suits. In keeping with increasingly nationalistic policies, he voiced a preference for Chinese ski equipment over imports.

When Mr. Xi went to inspect venues in the Chongli district of Zhangjiakou for the first time in January 2017, he ordered the local authorities to make sure that they did not build too much — a frequent tendency of officials in China who use any international event as an excuse for extravagant projects.

He has visited the Olympic venues five times altogether to check on progress, most recently earlier this month, when he said managing the Games well was China’s “solemn pledge to the international community.”

The political resolve that attracted Olympic officials has also become a challenge. Relieved but exhausted after managing the Summer Games in Tokyo, top officials tried to convince Beijing organizers to stick with a similar playbook in dealing with the coronavirus. China’s insistence on continuing with its “zero-COVID policy” created “a lot of natural tension,” Mr. Dubi said.

In the end the Olympic committee bowed to China’s demands for a far more invasive daily testing regimen, requiring thousands of individuals inside a bubble to provide daily throat swabs in an operation that Mr. Dubi said would be “massive” and “complex.”

When Peng Shuai’s [accusation of sexual harassment](#) rocked the sports world last fall, the committee found itself caught in the furor.



The official she accused, Zhang Gaoli, oversaw China's preparations for the 2022 Games for three years until his retirement in 2018. The authorities in China scrubbed her accusation from the internet and sought to deflect attention away from the issues — only to see concern over her fate redouble calls for a boycott of the Games or their sponsors.

Cloistered inside their offices in Lausanne, Switzerland, officials could do little except issue a statement suggesting that “quiet diplomacy” was the correct course.

Officials with some national Olympic committees [fumed in private](#). Without the protective cover of the international committee, they feared reprisals if they spoke out individually.

The 2008 Olympics also faced harsh criticism. A campaign led by the actress Mia Farrow called the event the “genocide games” because of China's [support](#) for Sudan despite its brutal crackdown in the Darfur region. The traditional torch relay was hounded by protests in cities on multiple continents, including Paris, London, San Francisco and Seoul.

The accusations against China today are, arguably, even more serious. The United States and other countries have declared that China's crackdown against the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang amounts to genocide. Ms. Farrow's biting sobriquet has resurfaced for 2022, with a Twitter hashtag.

“The severe repression that China has rolled out in Xinjiang, in Tibet, in Hong Kong has all taken place since 2015,” the year that the Olympic delegates awarded Beijing the Games, said Minky Worden, who has followed China's participation in the Olympics for Human Rights Watch for more than two decades.

“The I.O.C. would be within its right to say that these issues have to be addressed,” she said. “They haven't.”

There have been hints of misgivings about the choice of Beijing — “All the political issues driving the agenda today were not on the radar seven years ago,” Michael Payne, a former Olympic marketing director, said — and yet the Games will go on.

Because of the coronavirus, foreign spectators, and even ordinary Chinese, are prevented from attending the Games. Instead, China will allow [only screened spectators of its own choosing](#). It will mostly be a performance for Chinese and international television audiences, offering a choreographed view of the country, the one Mr. Xi's government has of itself.

If the coronavirus can be kept under control, Beijing could weather the Olympics with fewer problems than seemed likely when it won the rights to the Games seven years ago. Mr. Xi's government has already effectively declared it a success. A [dozen other Chinese cities](#) are already angling for the 2036 Summer Olympics.

“The world looks forward to China,” Mr. Xi said in an New Year's address, “and China is ready.”

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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Outlook private long-term care insurance</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://mynorthwest.com/3319983/long-term-care-private-insurance-advice/">https://mynorthwest.com/3319983/long-term-care-private-insurance-advice/</a>
GIST	<p>With the State House of Representatives <a href="#">passing a bill to delay</a> the <a href="#">WA Cares tax</a> by 18 months, there are more questions than answers for those who bought private long-term care insurance instead.</p> <p>About 450,000 people opted to avoid the 0.58% tax on income — about \$300 a year for someone earning \$50,000 — by getting a qualifying long-term care insurance plan as an alternative.</p> <p>Amy Anderson, government affairs director for the Association of Washington Business, said many of those who rushed to buy insurance plans before the deadline last fall likely planned to drop their coverage as soon as they got their opt-out letter from the Employment Security Department.</p>



Under the new circumstances, though, Anderson advises those people to think again.

“In the current law, there is not a process by which the Employment Security Department will come back and ask you to re-certify,” she said. “However, that does not mean that it won’t happen in future.”

She said that other than the action that has already been taken, lawmakers plan to table the long-term care discussions until next year. However, the Long-Term Services and Supports Trust Commission has already recommended mandating another check-in process by ESD to make sure that people are still current with their insurance plans — so Anderson said that people may want to hang onto those plans a bit longer.

In the meantime, the long-term care insurance industry is not expecting a high number of dropouts.

“They have not necessarily looked at that as, ‘This is going to completely decimate the insurance industry,’” Anderson said. “Are people going to drop it? Sure. Is that rate higher than what they would normally expect? That’s hard to say.”

Those insurance companies, she said, are counting on many people deciding that because insurance is smart to have — and because private is generally “a more robust product” than public in terms of what is covered — they will keep their plans.

But the road has not been smooth for the insurance providers. Anderson said that the effects of the WA Cares tax completely disrupted the market in Washington last summer and fall, as insurance companies realized that they would be selling plans to customers who planned to soon get rid of them.

“The way the law is currently written, you have the ability to drop that product. That is why the long-term market in the state collapsed ... Carriers stopped selling long-term care insurance in Washington state,” she said. “It became apparent that ... it became a tax-avoidance tool.”

In early September — two months before the deadline — the Office of the Insurance Commissioner [told KIRO Newsradio](#) that none of the state’s insurance companies were selling long-term care insurance for this reason.

That is why Anderson and the AWB would like to see future changes with the law include a grace period for people who still would like to buy private plans and opt out, but did not have the chance last year when the market collapsed. They would also like to see the tax include benefits for people who pay in, but then move out of state.

As the law is currently written, a person who pays in for more than 10 years and still lives in Washington state can draw a lifetime maximum of \$36,500.

“This is a policy that does not address the actual long-term care needs in the state of Washington. It was originally meant to be a bridge product for folks, to get them from a current situation to where they qualify for Medicaid,” Anderson said. “It is a very limited benefit, only \$36,500 one time, which does not get you much long-term care. Long-term care is extremely expensive.”

The AWB is hopeful that the likely delay for the tax will give lawmakers time to take a second crack at their work and make some improvements.

“The fact that we have an 18-month pause, from the business community perspective, we’re looking at this as, let’s really dig down and start to address what are the long-term care needs for Washingtonians, and how do we effectively address that,” Anderson said.

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SOURCE	<a href="https://mynorthwest.com/3320135/tsunami-study-washington-dnr/">https://mynorthwest.com/3320135/tsunami-study-washington-dnr/</a>
GIST	<p>A volcanic eruption halfway across the globe had the West Coast of the United States under a tsunami warning last Saturday. What local officials are worried about more, though, is the potential for a tsunami caused by an earthquake right here in the Puget Sound region.</p> <p>The Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) recently published a study detailing the damage from a tsunami following a 9.0 Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake, known more colloquially in seismology circles as “the Big One.” As DNR Chief Hazards Geologist Corinna Allen describes, the results of that study were “startling.”</p> <p>“Following a large subduction zone earthquake, we expect that the first wave will arrive on the outer coast in the La Push area about 10 minutes after the start of the earthquake,” she told Seattle’s Morning News on KIRO Newsradio. “The earthquake shaking could last anywhere from three to six minutes for one of these large subduction zone events, so that leaves very little time for evacuation in many coastal communities.”</p> <p>Allen estimates that the earthquake could produce waves measuring up to 45 feet above tide levels. Once tsunamis reach land, water levels across beaches on the outer Olympic Peninsula could be as high as 100 feet, as well as 20 to 50 feet high in “many communities.”</p> <p>“It’s an incredible amount of water in a very short amount of time,” she described.</p> <p>In the event of such a tsunami, Allen recommends evacuating to higher ground if possible. If that’s not an option, “vertical evacuation is essential” for coastal communities.</p> <p>That has many areas preparing vertical evacuation structures, operating as towers that can be built on top of existing structures like parking garages, hotels, or schools. The Washington Emergency Management Division (EMD) believes that the state needs at least 50 such structures — and as many as 85 — in order to provide vertical evacuation options to residents in at-risk communities.</p> <p>That said, Allen also points out that this represents “our worst case scenario.”</p> <p>“It is startling, and it is scary,” she said. “But it is more likely that we are going to experience a smaller tsunami from a distant source earthquake event like the 1964 Alaska earthquake.”</p> <p>“However, we do have a number of earthquake sources in Washington that could cause significant tsunamis, so trying to understand those hazards is critical for being able to plan for them,” she added.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	<i>You can learn more about the DNR’s research on tsunami hazards at <a href="#">this link</a>.</i>

HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Postal Service transforms into relief agency</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/01/21/usps-coronavirus-test-kits/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/01/21/usps-coronavirus-test-kits/</a>
GIST	<p>The U.S. Postal Service’s mission to deliver 500 million coronavirus test kits has cast it in an unprecedented role in the nation’s pandemic response just as covid-19 infections have peaked within its own ranks and its network is under immense strain.</p> <p>Online orders began rolling in this week for the free rapid tests, which are scheduled to ship by the end of the month. The agency has hired thousands of seasonal workers and converted more than 40 facilities into ad hoc fulfillment centers in what experts have called the largest disaster-relief mobilization in its 247-year history.</p> <p>The stakes for the country — and Postal Service — could hardly be higher. Americans are still struggling to access at-home coronavirus tests as the omicron variant is driving caseloads near record highs in parts of the country.</p>

Postmaster General Louis DeJoy hopes the test-kit assignment will relieve political heat on the agency caused by his [controversial 10-year cost-cutting plan](#) and its tumultuous performance during the 2020 presidential election — [which was heavily reliant on mail-in ballots](#) — according to four people familiar with his thinking. A good outcome could help the Postal Service win funding for a [much-needed fleet of delivery trucks](#) and restructure its massive debt burden.

Success, though, is far from assured, postal officials privately concede. The program requires the agency to take on entirely new duties and a fresh public face in the fight against the coronavirus. Test-kit processing snags, IT failures or delivery issues could set the agency's reputation back decades.

And rising workforce quarantines and isolations have already affected mail service. On-time delivery rates for first-class mail fell to 84.5 percent the week of Jan. 14, the agency's worst score since the pandemic began and well below its 95 percent target.

"Even if you know how to do it, it's never been done before. A lot can go wrong," said one senior postal official. "But if we can pull it off, wow."

White House officials did not respond to requests for comment.

The undertaking, as well as a separate nonpostal effort to distribute 400 million high-quality N95 masks, is part of the [Biden](#) administration's response to the omicron-powered coronavirus spike that caused [nearly 9 million people to miss work](#) in late December and early January.

Among them are the 19,742 postal workers in quarantine or isolation Friday after a positive test or exposure to the virus. It is the largest contingent to miss work since the pandemic began, according to the American Postal Workers Union.

What's more, health officials at postal installations are so overwhelmed by employee reports of new cases that they're unable to track and trace close contacts of newly infected individuals, or authorize those who have recovered to return to work. The issues are compounded, local union officials say, by other workers refusing to call in sick out of a fear of discipline.

Although the agency is set up to move billions of pieces of mail — letters, advertisements, ballots, parcels, even cremated remains — it has never managed its own off-the-shelf inventory or developed this kind of consumer-fulfillment operation.

This report is based on interviews with 32 current and former postal officials and agency employees, White House and union officials, and independent logistics and health experts. Many of them spoke on the condition of anonymity to give candid assessments of the administration's and Postal Service's preparedness for the test-kit shipment program.

Observers say the Postal Service is working furiously to retain seasonal employees for the campaign and reconfiguring its sprawling transportation network to handle the parcels. Agency leaders appear cautiously optimistic about the program, according to seven people directly involved with the effort, though worries persist about the wobbly postal IT system and rising workforce infections.

Rank-and-file workers report enthusiasm for the project even as regional supervisors have yet to receive instructions on how local postal facilities will handle the tidal wave of incoming test packets.

"The 650,000 women and men of the United States Postal Service are ready to deliver and proud to play a critical role in supporting the health needs of the American public," DeJoy said in a statement. "We have been working closely with the administration and are well prepared to accept and deliver test kits on the first day the program launches."

### **Scaling up operations**

As a wave of omicron variant infections swept the country last month, White House officials originally scoffed at the idea of mailing test kits to American homes. They changed tack weeks later.

Postal officials were giddy about the decision, said four people involved with the plans. DeJoy, long a President Biden foil, was intensely involved in conceiving the Postal Service's logistics footprint, the people said, drawing on his private-sector experience.

The agency has converted 43 package sorting plants launched during the holiday season to store and process the test kits, and extended the contracts of 8,000 seasonal employees to staff those sites, according to union officials. It plans to ship 2 million packages — each holding four test kits — every day.

Seasonal employees will work on 75-day renewable contracts; the Postal Service anticipates scaling down the operation by mid-April, though its future is largely dependent on the pandemic's course and how the White House chooses to distribute an additional 500 million test kits.

The administration has so far not commented on how it plans to provide those tests.

"The strategies that yielded improvements to our peak season performance will allow the Postal Service to distribute test kits efficiently nationwide," agency spokesman David Partenheimer said in a statement.

"These strategies, including additional staffing, an investment in new processing equipment and operational efficiencies, and an expanded facility footprint, mean test kits can get to the Americans who want them in a timely and efficient manner."

Postal workers will manage and track the inventory of tests. Agency engineers will oversee the customer ordering process, which generates mailing labels and postage for each package. Then postal staff will "pick and pack" test kits into parcels, reminiscent of a private-sector e-commerce operation.

It sounds easy, industry experts said. It is not. The program requires accountability for each test kit, not just each mailed parcel. The software behind customers' test-kit order form must integrate with operations from the 43 package annexes. And the Postal Service needs to extend commitments for trucking and freight air contractors to ensure tests are delivered in one to three days.

Test kits shipped within the contiguous United States will be delivered via first-class package service, and those sent to Alaska, Hawaii, offshore territories and foreign-based military and State Department employees will be via priority mail, Partenheimer said.

The Department of Health and Human Services will reimburse the Postal Service for its costs, said Partenheimer and HHS spokeswoman Kirsten Allen, though neither specified an amount.

Success, experts say, is highly dependent on the Postal Service's IT system — which the agency declined to discuss — and its staffing capability.

"If they have to get something to everybody, they have the obvious, obvious infrastructure to do it. But I think the challenge remains getting it into the system," said Leo Raymond, managing director of Mailers Hub, an organization that provides market information and support for commercial mailers. "It's not whether they can deliver it. It's the logistics of getting it to the delivery resource. That's where the trick comes in."

#### **'I'm sick, you're sick, what are we going to do?'**

Mounting covid-19 infections among postal staff remain a wild card. According to interviews with 13 postal workers and union officials in 11 states, the agency's pandemic response has been uneven and largely left to local supervisors.

Al Friedman, president of the Florida State Association of Letter Carriers, said he has fielded more than 100 calls from workers and shop stewards since early January with reports of postal workers being required to continue working despite showing coronavirus symptoms.

As a wave of infections swept through one Pennsylvania office, one transportation manager rushed to shore up mail shipment plans before their own covid-19 symptoms worsened. Elsewhere in the facility, colleagues who were not eligible for more than a few days of sick leave kept at the job, wary that a week's worth of isolation could lead to discipline.

"My manager called me and said, 'I'm sick, you're sick, what are we going to do?' the person said. "Everybody is at the point where they're scared to take off work. ... I know I definitely got it at work, because this is the only place that I go."

In Fremont, Ohio, infections sidelined 14 of the 50 employees at the local post office, said Jennifer Lemke, executive vice president of the American Postal Workers Union Local 170.

Postal health officials in the district, which serves Toledo and Cleveland, have been swamped with new cases and have not been able to track and trace new infections, or approve workers to return to their posts.

Return-to-work guides circulated to supervisors and union officials and obtained by The Washington Post have caused more confusion.

One guide, distributed Jan. 5, says employees who are staying home because they are symptomatic but have not tested positive for the virus can return upon satisfying three criteria. The document, however, lists only two succeeding items.

Another guide, updated Jan. 16, instructs supervisors to conduct a "verbal discussion with the employee" before referring their case to Postal Service occupational health nurse administrators. The guide specifically prohibits supervisors from taking "any written notes" from these conversations.

The absence of clear instruction has employees returning to work — or remaining on leave — on their own timelines, Lemke said.

"It ranges all over the place," she said. "We have one employee that said, 'Hey I've been out five days, I have no symptoms, I'll come back to work, but I'll wear a mask.' But masks are sort of a new thing here."

Partenheimer, the postal spokesman, said that the agency's pandemic mitigation plans — which include social distancing when appropriate, a "liberal" covid-19 leave policy, distribution of personal protective equipment and more frequent facility cleanings — "continue to perform well."

The agency mandates mask-wearing in jurisdictions that have their own mask mandates, Partenheimer said. Masks are required for nonpublic-facing employees who cannot maintain social distance in the workplace.

Some workers and union officials had hoped that the Postal Service would move quickly to comply with the Biden administration's vaccine-or-weekly-test requirement for large employers to stem the growing number of infections, but the U.S. Supreme Court largely struck down that policy earlier this month. Although postal workers are government employees, the agency does not fall under a similar Biden policy in place for federal workers and contractors.

Instead, the Postal Service asked for a temporary waiver from the vaccine-or-test policy, citing concerns that it would be "likely to result in the loss of many employees — either by employees leaving or being disciplined."

	<p>DeJoy and seven of the eight members of the agency’s governing board confirmed to The Post that they had been fully vaccinated. The board’s longest-serving member, Republican Robert M. Duncan, and Deputy Postmaster General Doug Tulino did not respond to requests for comment.</p> <p>Partenheimer said postal workers are not “currently” required to be vaccinated or provide evidence of negative coronavirus tests as a condition of employment.</p> <p>Still, postal workers said they were optimistic about the Postal Service’s ability to distribute the test kits. The mail service is at its highest staffing complement in recent memory after DeJoy instructed hiring managers to begin onboarding holiday seasonal workers months earlier than in years past. And even with infections rising, workers say morale is high.</p> <p>“There isn’t really another infrastructure in place in the country that will do what we do,” said one letter carrier in Los Angeles. “The core value of the Postal Service to begin with is [delivery to] every address, every day, to keep every community and every business and every [person] off the grid connected to the world, if they want to be. In those corners, there isn’t another way to do it. It’s kind of what we signed up for.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 WA confirmed US 1<sup>st</sup> Covid patient 2yrs ago</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/washington-confirmed-the-countrys-first-covid-patient-2-years-ago-what-have-we-learned/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/washington-confirmed-the-countrys-first-covid-patient-2-years-ago-what-have-we-learned/</a>
GIST	<p>Infectious diseases were all Everett physician Dr. George Diaz had ever wanted to study.</p> <p>The specialized area of medicine is demanding, he said, but after more than 15 years in the field, the Providence Regional Medical Center doctor can’t imagine doing anything else.</p> <p>“I feel like this is what I was supposed to do in my life,” he said in an interview Thursday.</p> <p>A renewed appreciation for his years of training became apparent almost exactly two years ago, when Diaz received a call that confirmed a Snohomish County man in his 30s had tested positive for the mysterious new virus that had emerged from Wuhan, China.</p> <p>Before he knew it, Diaz had become the doctor in charge of <a href="#">treatment for the first COVID-19 patient in the United States</a>.</p> <p>Fortunately, hospital staffers said at the time, Providence teams had practiced receiving an Ebola patient weeks before, and isolation procedures were fresh in their minds. When Diaz received the call about the COVID patient, he had also just returned from an infectious diseases conference.</p> <p>“It was like doing a fire drill, and then having a fire,” he said.</p> <p>Yet another year has passed trapped in a pandemic, with more highs and lows than many of us can count. Within the second year of COVID, vaccines became widely available to the public, saving lives and reducing severe illness, but also igniting fierce tensions between those who sought the shots and those who won’t. The summer’s wave of the delta variant, which hit the state particularly hard, again overwhelmed hospitals and killed more Washingtonians than any previous wave.</p> <p>Then, just when daily case counts were falling toward pre-delta levels, a new variant emerged. While research shows omicron infections produce a much milder illness than past variants, its rapid transmissibility is still responsible for a record number of infections and hospitalizations throughout the state.</p>

At the end of the first year of COVID, public health leaders and medical experts remained hopeful about the promise of widespread vaccines and continued teamwork among community members to limit viral spread. While that still exists, now mostly exhaustion remains.

“We really had no idea how long it was going to last or how bad it was going to be,” Diaz said. “Two years out, having more patients than ever in our hospital is pretty disheartening.”

As of Thursday, the Everett hospital was caring for more than 200 COVID patients, up from a previous high of about 138 in December 2020, according to a Providence spokesperson.

“For a facility with 600 beds, (that means) one in three patients have COVID, which is a number that is almost unimaginable,” he said.

Statewide, hospitals were caring for more than 2,300 coronavirus patients as of Thursday, though the number of new hospitalizations is down a bit, according to Cassie Sauer, CEO of the Washington State Hospital Association.

“We’re all crossing our fingers that that’s the beginning of a trend, not just a blip,” Sauer said Thursday morning.

Last week, the state confirmed it had surpassed a million confirmed coronavirus infections since the beginning of the pandemic — about 238,000 in the first year, then 867,000 in the second, reflecting the swift paces of delta and omicron.

More than 5 million Washingtonians, or 71.6% of the eligible population, have been fully vaccinated, though some pockets of the state, particularly in northeastern and southwestern Washington, are reporting that less than 40% of people have received both shots.

Meanwhile, COVID deaths slowly continue to tick up. The state is averaging 30 to 35 COVID deaths per day, a noticeable jump since mid-December, when about 12 to 20 people were dying every day, Sauer said. To date, more than 10,000 Washingtonians have died from COVID.

“I struggle to imagine the grief and heartache that they leave behind,” Sauer said. “There’s a lot about this pandemic that we can repair, but these deaths cannot be undone.”

### **Then and now**

At Providence in Everett, feelings of constant stress are apparent in many hospital staffers, Diaz said. The grueling nature of working in health care now has pushed many of his co-workers to leave the profession — an understandable decision, he said.

But there are still signs of optimism on the horizon, especially in comparison to where we started, Diaz said.

“Omicron is far more contagious than any other variant, so we’ve had to modify how we protect our staff with PPE, but overall the lessons we learned early on are still applicable today,” he said. “We have more effective treatments now, (and) a number of therapeutics that help people”

Remdesivir, an antiviral drug proven to reduce severe COVID infection, was approved by the Food and Drug Administration in late 2020 and in the past year has become widely used in hospitals to treat COVID patients. Monoclonal antibodies are also part of now routine COVID treatment in many health care systems, [a supply the state stabilized last fall](#).

The FDA [also approved two antiviral pills in late December](#), one made by Merck and one by Pfizer, that will likely [improve global access to COVID therapy](#).

“There’s still a lot of learning to do, but we’ve come a long way in treatment,” Diaz said.



	<p>Still, high COVID hospitalization numbers, canceled surgeries and difficulties discharging patients continue to wear on staff, he said.</p> <p>“A major issue for us, and all of Western Washington, is logjams in the hospital,” he said.</p> <p>Like many other health care systems, Providence is struggling to discharge patients who have recovered from COVID or other illnesses but still need some type of care. Long-term care facilities are often either understaffed or lack enough beds to take discharged patients, so many are stuck in the hospital with nowhere to go.</p> <p>Diaz said he’s also discouraged at the continued pushback against vaccines and booster shots in many parts of the country.</p> <p>“I would’ve sort of expected the U.S. to come together and for the common good get everyone vaccinated,” he said. “I figured it would have been something considered patriotic.</p> <p>“It’s surprising and the most disheartening that those beliefs are having such profound effects on our hospitals.”</p> <p>Two years ago, no one knew where the pandemic would take us. Today, the uncertainty remains.</p>
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<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>01/22 Long-term care takes toll on caregivers</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/long-term-care-takes-a-toll-on-caregivers-will-the-wa-cares-fund-help/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/long-term-care-takes-a-toll-on-caregivers-will-the-wa-cares-fund-help/</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>Angela Petersen always imagined spending her retirement traveling with her husband of over 30 years. But that changed nearly three years ago, when Chris Petersen had two strokes and was diagnosed with dementia.</p> <p>Now, the Tukwila resident’s life revolves around caring for her 63-year-old husband — from brushing his teeth, to putting on his sneakers, to making sure he drinks water and swallows his pills. It’s an extraordinary change for the couple, who met in high school, exercised daily and raised two college athletes.</p> <p>After the first stroke, Angela, 62, left her job as an office supervisor with the Department of Defense, just missing the 30-year retirement mark. She worked part time as a substitute teacher, but left that job after her husband accidentally drove their car into the garage while she was at work.</p> <p>Between his disability and her retirement payments, they get about \$3,000 each month, putting most paid assistance out of the question, she said. In Washington, a vetted in-home aide can cost upward of \$35 to \$50 an hour, and adult day care or health services can cost between \$50 and \$100 a day, according to Erica Farrell, a senior clinical manager for the Alzheimer’s Association’s Washington state chapter.</p> <p>But as tight as money is, Angela Petersen’s time is even more constrained. Chris, who is largely nonverbal, requires constant supervision. Alarms were installed on the doors after he quietly left the house several times and went missing.</p> <p>If Petersen needs to leave the house, she has to find someone to watch Chris or find a way to take him with her. That has led to a mix of awkward and scary situations, she said, like the time she had to leave in the middle of a hair appointment to search for him, or when he became agitated during a red-eye flight.</p> <p>There are good days and bad days, but Petersen says the entire experience has been frustrating and isolating. Some days, she feels selfish for wanting to get her nails done. Other times, resentful.</p>

“I don’t want anything to happen to him,” Petersen said. “But I also want to live a life.”

In many ways, the Petersens fall into the exact category of people Washington state’s fledgling long-term care insurance program is promising to help. The family has too many assets to qualify for Medicaid assistance, but not enough resources to hire paid help — leaving a gap that only Angela can fill.

The WA Cares Fund was passed in 2019 to [provide a \\$36,500 lifetime benefit](#) for people, who have difficulty living on their own, to pay for a wide swath of services including equipment, transportation and a home health aide.

While the program is years away from paying out benefits and won’t cover people who have already retired, lawmakers [in support of the policy](#) say the insurance program will keep people from falling into poverty as the number of residents 75 and older is expected to double in Washington over the next 20 years.

However, the program, funded by Washington employees with [a 0.58% payroll deduction](#), has been embroiled in [criticism and political fights](#). Some see the program as an unnecessary tax and others point out certain people will pay into the program but never see benefits — including near-retirees and people who live out of state.

In December, facing a ballot initiative to potentially gut the program, Gov. Jay Inslee and Democratic lawmakers pledged to delay implementing the payroll tax until 2023. And while the initiative [ultimately failed](#), House lawmakers [have already voted to do so](#) and allow additional people to opt-out of the program.

### **The toll of caregiving**

In the U.S., most people pay out of pocket for long-term care for older people or anyone with a chronic illness or disability. When the WA Cares Fund is implemented, it will be the first public long-term care insurance program of its kind.

While Medicare pays for some rehabilitative services following an accident or illness, it does not cover long-term care. Medicaid pays for some long-term care but only for those who meet a strict list of qualifications within a certain time period. The process can get so complicated that families often consult specialized lawyers.

Nearly 830,000 people in Washington provide some form of unpaid care for loved ones, fulfilling over 80% of the state’s long-term care needs, according to a legislative report.

Unpaid care disproportionately [burdens women and women of color](#), who often [become caregivers earlier than their white counterparts](#), according to research conducted by AARP. Because paid long-term care is expensive, women often leave their jobs or retire early to become caregivers, which translates to an estimated \$324,000 in lost lifetime wages and Social Security and pension benefits, according to [a 2011 MetLife study](#).

Those losses in productivity from women in their prime earning years are exactly what prompted countries across Europe and Asia to institute programs that care for older residents, said WA Cares Fund Director Ben Veghte.

“They know it’s terrible for their GDP to have women in their 40s and 50s staying home doing work that someone else could do for \$15 an hour,” he said.

Caring for a loved one, even with paid resources, was a “trip through hell,” said Nancy Simsons, 73, a retired teacher in Green Lake. When her husband died in 2016 after living with dementia for five years, it felt as if he died for a second time, she said.

Her husband needed help with any movement, and the doorways of their home were too narrow for a wheelchair. He spent his final years with full-time caregivers — first, at an adult family home that cost \$6,500 a month, then at an apartment that cost \$10,000 a month.

Simmons managed to pay for his care, which totaled nearly \$500,000, with his savings and her family inheritance. It was lucky he was not lucid enough to know how at risk their finances were, she said.

Finding facilities and caregivers for older adults who don't speak English is especially difficult and expensive, said Beacon Hill resident Lynda Wong, 50. Her parents immigrated to Seattle from Hong Kong in 1975 and worked in sewing factories and restaurants, where they never needed to learn English.

This year they will turn 90. Her father has difficulty with mobility from a stroke and her mother is not strong enough to clean or cook. While Wong pays \$5,200 a month for an aide who can speak their dialect of Chinese to come by for five hours each day, she worries for other immigrants who do not have children to advocate for them.

“My parents and their friends have overcome historical challenges to build productive lives here,” she said. “It is not for lack of bravery that they fall short.”

### **Will WA Cares be enough for most people?**

Most people — [around 7 in 10](#) — require some degree of long-term care at some point after they turn 65.

It's a statistic widely cited by the WA Cares Fund. But what's not clear is how many of those people will struggle with daily life enough to qualify for the benefit, how long they will need care and how far the \$36,500 benefit will go in assistance.

[Researchers from Boston College](#) attempted to use existing data to break down the country's population by how much care they require in terms of duration and intensity after they turn 65.

Research assistant Patrick Hubbard said what they found was that long-term care needs — including from a relative dropping off groceries to paying for a nursing home — vary widely.

The research shows 17% of people won't ever require care, while 22% require minimal help with tasks like cooking, 38% need help with bathing or eating while recovering from a medical emergency like a heart attack or stroke for up to two years, and 24% need intense care for three or more years due to dementia or cancer.

In order to qualify for WA Cares benefits, individuals must need assistance with at least three activities of daily living, though the fund has yet to formally define them. (Long-term care programs funded by Medicaid in Washington use [a list of 11 activities](#), including dressing, medication management, toileting and bathing.)

While the fund has yet to figure out how that provision will be applied, director Veghte said the goal is to ensure care is available to those who truly need it.

Hubbard said \$36,500 won't be enough to completely cover anyone's needs, but would likely supplement a family's personal resources.

Petersen, who wasn't familiar with the WA Cares Fund, said while the program sounds like a good idea, the money wouldn't change her situation.

Ideally, she would want enough respite care for her husband so she could work some shifts as a substitute teacher. She misses interacting with other people, Petersen said.

When the WA Cares Fund was passed, Wong said she thought it barely addressed the costs of aging in the U.S., and the most vulnerable aging populations who don't have a support system.

	<p>“I remember thinking, ‘This is kind of useless,’” she said. “I have a pretty good idea of what [long-term care] costs are and this is a drop in the bucket.”</p> <p>Farrell, with the Alzheimer’s Association, works with people with dementia, who are often those requiring the most costly care. She said the additional savings is a win, and will allow those who need a break to pay for respite care.</p> <p>“I think it comes back to your quality of life and having the ability to have more freedom,” she said.</p> <p>Bainbridge Island resident Kymmberly Myrick, 58, whose husband needed long-term care help toward the end of his life due to pancreatic cancer, said she thinks people who challenge the WA Cares Fund or Obamacare have not had to deal with the U.S. health care system or a loved one at the end of their life.</p> <p>“People do not understand that their parents aren’t going to die in their sleep. They’re going to get sick, somebody is going to need help and someone is going to have to quit work,” Myrick said. “Usually it’s women — a daughter or wife.”</p> <p>Simsons said she also supports the WA Cares Fund, adding that the money would have given her some breathing room each month.</p> <p>“It is unconscionable that the richest country in the world has no provisions for taking care of those who are victims of dementia and other fatal diseases,” she said.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 WA common, devastating natural hazard</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/environment/when-the-land-slides-a-common-devastating-natural-hazard-in-the-pacific-northwest/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/environment/when-the-land-slides-a-common-devastating-natural-hazard-in-the-pacific-northwest/</a>
GIST	<p>The cause of the <a href="#">recent slide that pushed a Bellevue home off its foundation this week is not yet known</a>. But unquestioned is the regularity with which homes and lives are lost to landslides in Washington.</p> <p>It is the nature of the state’s geology and topography to slip, slide and slump during the wet months of the year. Take our slopes, just add water — and gravity.</p> <p>Landslides are one of the most common and devastating natural hazards in the Pacific Northwest — and the damage they cause is almost never covered by insurance, warns the state Department of Natural Resources in its <a href="#">Homeowner’s Guide to Landslides, at st.news/slide</a>.</p> <p>That there even is such a guide should be taken as fair warning: We all live in and around landslide country.</p> <p>Now is the time when the risk is accentuated, as abundant rains saturate soils. What happens next, explains Washington State Geologist Casey Hanell of the DNR, is predictable — and in some cases, preventable.</p> <p>The principles at work are familiar to anyone who has ever built a sand castle. Those grains of sand that stick together making vertical walls with just the right amount of moisture? They dissolve to liquid as more water is added.</p> <p>So it goes with many slopes, given the right combination of soils, water, slope and gravity.</p> <p>There are two major types of landslides, Hanell explains.</p> <p>One is the shallow, or rapid landslide — basically a debris flow that happens quickly. In this case, water soaks through soil and rock, and ponds on impermeable bedrock. The layer of saturated soil and debris eventually will slide in a quick sloughing of material.</p>

Any commuter on the Sounder trains traveling at the base of bluffs along the shore of Puget Sound is all too familiar with these sorts of landslides, which disrupt service on the mud-piled tracks.

The other type of landslide is called a deep-seated slide. These occur much more deeply in the subsurface of the earth. These slides typically move slowly — over decades, even centuries.

There are hundreds of such slides across Washington, Hanell notes, that moved under different climate conditions and are presently dormant. But they can be set off again by human activities, such as excavating at the base of a slope, or adding water to it, Hanell said.

Washington has [seen many large and lethal landslides](#).

The [Oso landslide in Snohomish County on March 22, 2014](#), killed 43 people and destroyed 49 homes and other structures when an unstable hill collapsed, sending mud and debris south across the North Fork of the Stillaguamish River and Highway 530.

Over the past year, [scientists have acquired new insight](#) into the circumstances surrounding the Oso slide. Research by the U.S. Geological Survey indicates that the landslide's average speed was about 40 mph, with maximum speeds likely even higher. The area overrun by the landslide was about half a square mile, and the landslide moved about 18 million tons of sand, till and clay. That amount of material would cover about 600 football fields 10 feet deep.

Precipitation in the area during February and March 2014 was 150% to 200% of the long-term average, and likely contributed to slide's initiation and mobility, the USGS analysis found.

The hillside's history of slides dates back more than 60 years and [some experts said they were shocked when homebuilding was permitted after a big slide in 2006](#). A 1999 report filed with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers warned of the potential for catastrophic failure. Two creeks in the area are known as Slide Creek and Mud Flow Creek. Experts also warned against logging on a plateau above the slope, because of [risk of a catastrophic slide](#).

The Aldercrest-Banyon landslide was a major slow-moving landslide in east Kelso, Cowlitz County, that began in 1998 and continued for nine months into 1999. The disaster caused \$110 million in damage and destroyed 138 homes.

On Oct. 11, 2009, a [massive landslide in the Nile Valley](#) of Yakima County demolished a half mile of state Route 410 and redirected the flow of the Naches River.

A [1997 slide on Perkins Lane in the Magnolia](#) neighborhood sent houses tumbling to the beach.

Another massive slide in 2013 [on Whidbey Island](#) sent a 1,000-foot-wide swath off a hillside cliff into the Ledgewood Beach development on the west side of the island. The powerful slide shoved one home at the bottom of the cliff about 200 feet into the water, and took out nearly 400 feet of Driftwood Way, the road to the shoreline.

Incredibly, there were no injuries.

A Bainbridge Island family of four [was killed in 1997 by an avalanche of mud](#) that hit their home as they slept on Rolling Bay Walk. The crushing slide knocked the third floor of the home off, sending it into Puget Sound, and buried the rest of the house under tons of mud. Five other houses in the neighborhood were declared unsafe due to slide risk.

The cause of the slide was determined to be rainfall and melted snow, which saturated the slope. The neighborhood had historically been a slide area, with winter months routinely sending mud pouring onto beaches.

There are steps that can be taken to live more securely with our state's landslide risk, DNR advises.

Don't add water to steep slopes. Avoid placing fill soil, yard waste or debris on steep slopes, or excavating beneath them. Always drain surface runoff away from slopes, fix plumbing leaks that could saturate soil, and plant and protect native ground cover and trees. Consult professionals if you suspect you are on a landslide.

DNR's [Geologic Information Portal](#), searchable by address, is one place to start.

For Seattle residents living in a house in hilly terrain or thinking of buying one, the city maintains [an online page of resources](#) as well as [survey maps showing areas having a 40% or greater slope](#). Make no mistake, landslides are us, [in a city that has recorded more than 1,300 slides](#).

But it's up to the homeowner to research and, if needed, take preventive measures, including hiring a geotechnical engineer for a site survey.

As the Northwest's rainy season takes its usual toll, the Northwest Insurance Council, a trade group, once again is [posting the warning on its website](#) that standard homeowners, renters and business insurance policies do not include coverage for landslides.

Special coverage called a "Difference of Condition" policy is available for stand-alone purchase but is expensive and usually obtained from a broker in specialty lines of insurance.

Relentless rain once again this fall and winter — [at times breaking records](#) — is a good reminder that water is heavy, soils get saturated, and gravity wins. Don't ignore the sign of soil movement, Hanell said.

Cracks in walls, bulging walls or cracks in floors. Tilting retaining walls, cracks in foundations and bent trees. These are clues that the ground is shifting.

"Be aware of your surroundings," Hanell said. And always, evacuate any structure that starts to slide.

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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 US blocks flights by Chinese airlines</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/business/us-blocks-flights-by-chinese-airlines-in-escalating-dispute/">https://www.seattletimes.com/business/us-blocks-flights-by-chinese-airlines-in-escalating-dispute/</a>
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The United States moved Friday to block 44 flights to the U.S. by Chinese airlines in retaliation for China forcing the cancellation of flights by U.S. airlines.</p> <p>The Transportation Department order affecting four Chinese airlines is the latest development in a long-running dispute over COVID-19 restrictions.</p> <p>China previously barred some inbound flights by Delta Air Lines, United Airlines and American Airlines after passengers on earlier flights tested positive for the virus. The U.S. maintains that China's actions violated a treaty over access to each country by the other country's airlines.</p> <p>The Transportation Department said that China's move to block 44 flights by U.S. carriers was "adverse to the public interest and warrant proportionate remedial action by the department."</p> <p>The department said that China's regulations are unfair because passengers who test negative for the virus before their flight but positive up to seven days later can result in future flights being canceled.</p> <p>The U.S. order limits flights between Jan. 30 and March 29 by Air China, China Eastern Airlines, China Southern Airlines and Xiamen Airlines.</p>



	<p>The dispute over flights goes back to 2020 and the early days of the pandemic. In 2020, the Trump administration backed down from a threat to block four Chinese airlines after China agreed to let United and Delta operate a limited number of flights.</p> <p>The spat flared again in August 2021, when the U.S. Transportation Department limited the number of passengers on some Chinese flights to the U.S. after China imposed similar limits on United. In December, Delta blamed new Chinese restrictions when a plane bound for Shanghai returned to Seattle.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 Talks fail, Seattle concrete strike continues</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/business/seattle-concrete-strike-continues-after-union-calls-mediation-a-failure/">https://www.seattletimes.com/business/seattle-concrete-strike-continues-after-union-calls-mediation-a-failure/</a>
GIST	<p>A mediation between local concrete companies and hundreds of striking mixer drivers ended early Thursday evening without a resolution, raising the prospect that the months-long dispute could continue to disrupt Seattle-area construction with project delays and layoffs.</p> <p>Union officials representing about 300 striking drivers called Thursday’s meeting an “unmitigated failure,” and suggested that the strike could drag on for weeks.</p> <p>A spokesperson for four of the concrete companies confirmed the talks had ended “without a resolution to the open labor agreement.”</p> <p>Jennifer Disotell, head of the Northwest District of Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, which facilitated the talks, declined to give details, but confirmed that the two parties met Thursday with Commissioner Roger Moore and Regional Director Beth Schindler and that the decision to end the talks came at the direction of Moore and Schindler. Disotell stressed that the talks could resume and that “the door remains open for further conversation.”</p> <p>The strike began on a smaller scale in November, then expanded in early December to 330 workers for six companies. The two sides had not bargained since the strike began.</p> <p>The dispute has <a href="#">slowed construction projects across the Seattle area</a> and led to the layoffs of hundreds of other construction workers amid a building boom. Because concrete is one of the most essential building materials in many parts of the construction process, a lack of concrete can grind some projects to a halt.</p> <p>The strike is the latest to hit the region’s construction industry as a labor shortage has given workers new leverage. Members of the <a href="#">Northwest Carpenters Union were on strike</a> for nearly three weeks last fall. The carpenters, whose pay ranged from roughly \$47 to \$48 an hour, approved a contract that included a \$2.26 wage increase each year.</p> <p>The top hourly rate for mixer drivers is about \$37 an hour, according to the union.</p> <p>The drivers union, Teamsters Local 174, said the employers “offered no movement” and did not offer a new contract proposal during talks Thursday.</p> <p>The concrete companies declined to share details of the meeting or their latest offer, but a statement Friday from four of the companies reiterated an earlier claim that the companies had presented the drivers with “the best package we have ever offered.”</p> <p>The concrete companies “are committed to the FMCS process as the best way to reach an agreement,” said a statement from the companies.</p> <p>As the strike has delayed projects and spurred layoffs across the region, political and business leaders have tried to persuade the union and companies to make a deal.</p>



In a Tuesday statement, seven large general contractors with operations in the Seattle area urged the two sides to reach a settlement and warned that the strike had already caused substantial economic damage.

“Currently, thousands of tradespeople are sitting idle and unable to work due to this strike action,” wrote the contractors, including GLY, Sellen and Turner, in a letter to both sides Wednesday.

“I don’t think we ever thought that they would come out of it saying, ‘hey, we’ve got a deal,’” said Bill Ketcham, general manager of the Seattle office of Turner Construction. “But you would have hoped that the sides would’ve come out and said, ‘hey, we made some really good progress today’... but instead, what it sounds like is both sides are still entrenched.”

Drivers also said they were disappointed by the failure of the talks Thursday.

“I figured they would at least try to convince the mediator they were here to make progress, and would pay some lip service towards movement on our big priorities, but they didn’t even bother making a proposal to put us back to work,” said Schuyler Brazier, a driver at Stoneway Concrete, in a statement.

King County Executive Dow Constantine has tried to persuade both sides to settle, a spokesperson said last week. A spokesperson for Gov. Jay Inslee said the state Department of Transportation “has been monitoring the impacts of the strike and keeping our office apprised, but the governor is not involved in the negotiations at this point.”

Neither side will share the exact terms of their negotiations. The union says its members are pushing for better pay and benefits, and that the companies have offered a deal that falls short of terms other building trades have received.

Concrete companies said their earlier offer includes a 17.6% pay increase over three years and “improves pension contributions,” among other things.

No further negotiations are scheduled, according to the union and the concrete companies. But pressure to settle is clearly mounting on both sides as the dispute threatens to halt more construction projects and put more workers on unemployment.

Although Teamsters officials have said other building trades support the strike, the prospect of hundreds more layoffs of carpenters, ironworkers, operators and laborers will continue to ramp up pressure to reach a deal.

Strike-related work delays at some Sound Transit projects and at the Washington state Convention Center expansion have already led to 200 layoffs, project officials said last week.

About 50 electrical workers who are part of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 46 have been laid off related to the strike and “we’re expecting that number to grow,” said Ryan Paddock, business representative for the local, which has about 4,200 members. “A lot of jobs that were supposed to be starting in January and February are now delayed until March, April or beyond, depending on when this gets resolved.”

Mixer drivers could also lose health insurance next month because their coverage is based on hours worked in a given month, according to the union.

“Livelihoods are on the line for thousands of workers,” Teamsters Local 174 Secretary-Treasurer Rick Hicks said in a statement Thursday.

Concrete companies are also likely feeling mounting pressure from builders who have contracts for cement deliveries. “They all have contractual obligations to us, so they have a significant amount of pressure on them,” said Turner’s Ketcham. “So every one of them is on notice.”

	Even with the risk of layoffs, Paddock said his union backs the strike. “We’re worried, but supportive,” he said. “Nobody wants to be laid off because of it, but you also want the Teamsters to get a good contract for their membership.”
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Study highlights Covid high-risk locations</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/where-youre-most-likely-to-catch-covid-new-study-highlights-high-risk-locations/">https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/where-youre-most-likely-to-catch-covid-new-study-highlights-high-risk-locations/</a>
GIST	<p>What are the odds of catching COVID-19 after a night at the movie theater? How about an afternoon at the gym, unmasked? Or an early morning jog in a neighborhood park?</p> <p>It’s well known that certain places and activities carry varying risks of coronavirus exposure, but a <a href="#">new study</a> published in the peer-reviewed Environmental Science &amp; Technology journal takes away much of the guesswork, offering clear estimates instead.</p> <p>Researchers behind the paper analyzed outbreaks and superspreader events and studied factors that hinder and aid the virus’ spread, to design a mathematical model that takes many factors into account before giving a percentage risk of infection.</p> <p>The percentage isn’t a perfectly accurate estimate, but it helps answer several complex questions: In what situations am I mostly likely to catch COVID-19? Least likely? And how likely is “likely?”</p> <p>Go into a crowded movie theater with poor ventilation and a mostly unmasked audience, and there’s a <a href="#">14% chance of being infected</a>, assuming everyone in the room is silent before, during and after the movie, according to the study data.</p> <p>But if there are people talking throughout — potentially launching viral particles into the air as they do — the odds of infection when unmasked jump to 54%.</p> <p>If the crowd is masked, the risk of infection drops to 5.3% without talking and 24% with talking.</p> <p>Given that COVID-19 spreads primarily through airborne particles, masks, ventilation, the number of people in a room or building and time spent in that space all factor heavily in the equation.</p> <p>Also critical is what’s happening around someone. Heavy exercise poses the most risk, followed by shouting and singing, then normal speaking. Least worrisome is the “silent” category.</p> <p>Unsurprisingly, being outdoors, masked and surrounded by silence is the best way to avoid coronavirus, researchers found. And the opposite is true: heavy exercise in a poorly ventilated place packed with maskless people is a nearly surefire way to catch COVID-19 — it’s 99% effective.</p> <p>But in between those two extremes are findings that may surprise some.</p> <p>For example, working out for even a short amount of time in a well-ventilated gym carries a 17% chance of infection if masks aren’t in use.</p> <p>And if it’s poorly ventilated? There’s a 67% chance.</p> <p>In many situations, changing just one single factor can be the difference between being relatively safe or likely infected.</p> <p>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that along with wearing masks, getting vaccinated and keeping at least six feet apart, improved ventilation — including open windows, ceiling fans and portable air cleaners — <a href="#">can help curb the spread of COVID-19</a>.</p>

	<p>“With good ventilation, the concentration of virus particles in the air will be lower and they will leave your home faster than with poor ventilation,” the agency says.</p> <p>But researchers concluded that many indoor facilities, businesses, schools, houses of worship — the buildings where we spend our daily lives — are not adequately designed or equipped to handle the pandemic.</p> <p>“We urgently need to improve the safety of the air that we breathe across a range of environments,” researchers wrote in their paper. “Data from COVID-19 outbreaks consistently show that a large fraction of buildings worldwide have very low ventilation rates despite the requirements set in national building standards.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 WA out of free at-home tests within hours</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/free-covid-tests-washington-at-home/281-f1d537c0-c05d-4690-aff1-0f64e60a37bc">https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/free-covid-tests-washington-at-home/281-f1d537c0-c05d-4690-aff1-0f64e60a37bc</a>
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — The Washington State Department of Health (DOH) ran out of free at-home tests by 6 p.m. on the day the online ordering portal opened, according to the department.</p> <p>Washington residents could order up to five at-home COVID-19 antigen tests for free through the <a href="#">“Say Yes! COVID Test” website</a>, which came online Friday morning following a short briefing with DOH leadership.</p> <p>Anyone looking to order free tests can head to the site and type in their zip code to see if they are eligible, however, tests won't be available for order until a the DOH receives a new shipment. Tests will only ship to Washington zip codes.</p> <p>The state anticipates more tests will come in next week and the week after.</p> <p>The new portal came online just days after the <a href="#">federal portal was launched</a>, allowing every American to order four at-home tests for free.</p> <p>While the new portal is considered an important step in making tests widely available for Washingtonians, the DOH warned that supply will be limited at first.</p> <p>Secretary of Health Dr. Umair Shah said the state would get more tests in the coming weeks which Washington residents can order online.</p> <p>“We have about 650,000 tests today in hand that we can put out to be ordered and be ready to be shipped,” Shah said. “We are anticipating more tests to come in early next week, and then more even at the end of next week.”</p> <p>The state has committed to buying 3.5 million at-home tests and distributing those to Washingtonians, but the DOH said that it wanted to get this initial shipment out as it waits for more orders, some of which have been delayed due to ongoing supply chain issues.</p> <p>Deputy Secretary of COVID Response Lacy Fehrenbach said, “We want to make sure these tests are in your medicine cabinet when you need them and not on our shelves or a shelf somewhere else in a warehouse.”</p> <p>The DOH is also urging those who already have a supply of tests or can afford to buy them at a pharmacy or store to not immediately order their free tests from the state due to limited demand.</p> <p>“If you look in your medicine cabinet right now, and you've got five or 10, or you've got enough, or you feel you don't need them, or you can buy them somewhere, you can go to the federal website, you can get</p>

it from your insurance, please be kind and do that,” Shah said. “This is a limited supply, and we want to make sure we're we're really made again making that known to everyone.”

For those who do not have access to the internet or language limitations, orders are also being taken through the DOH’s COVID-19 hotline at 1-800-525-0127.

It is also possible to report a positive test result through the [WA Notify](#) app or through the COVID-19 hotline.

The renewed efforts to widely test the population come amid the ongoing surge in the virus’s omicron variant, which has created the sixth wave of the pandemic for Washington state.

The Director of the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington's School of Medicine Dr. Chris Murray held a briefing earlier Friday to discuss current projections for the virus, which seems to be on the downturn with case rates declining.

“We expect after the Omicron wave a period of low transmission of COVID. And we also think that, as we're seeing in Europe and a number of other countries starting to follow suit, that given the much lower severity for omicron, given the extraordinary transmissibility [and] the ineffectual nature of contact tracing and quarantine, that most countries will drop restrictions as the wave subsides,” Murray said.

While the wave isn’t expected to end for a matter of weeks in most places, Murray suggested that high levels of testing and quarantining measures even now are unreasonable.

“Testing and quarantine does not appear to be practical or having an impact when you have so much infection in the community,” he said. He said that with the positivity rate of 10% per day, which he said was realistic at peak transmission, it would mean that roughly half of the population would have to quarantine due to many individuals living together in households and other congregate settings.

“You just can't do it. We don't have the capacity to find all these infections, get them to quarantine, nor would it do much given the fact that it's so transmissible,” Murray said. “So, the whole strategy of detecting infections and quarantine probably is not having much of an impact at all on Omicron. It worked here hugely usefully for previous waves, but once you have something this transmissible, probably quite futile.”

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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Schools lack funding nurses, counselors</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.king5.com/article/news/education/washington-schools-nurse-counselor-psychologist-shortage/281-f729dd4e-c577-48d6-a3bd-f4a47fea7a35">https://www.king5.com/article/news/education/washington-schools-nurse-counselor-psychologist-shortage/281-f729dd4e-c577-48d6-a3bd-f4a47fea7a35</a>
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA, Wash. — Washington state badly needs additional school nurses, psychologists and counselors to help students weather the pandemic, in addition to local funding and support.</p> <p>That's what lawmakers and regional district leaders are saying during ongoing talks about student emotional and physical health support systems. The conversations come at a time when students, parents and teachers have voiced concerns related to masks, testing and internal support.</p> <p>"Right now, the state is spending on nine nurses for our 50,000 students in Seattle," said Jolynn Berge, the Chief Financial Officer for the Seattle School District. She says local levy support has allowed the district to hire close to sixty others, but research suggests that is still well behind recommended standards.</p> <p>A 2020 University of Washington study suggests there is one school nurse for just under every 1,200 Washington students, and while that's an improvement from 20 years ago, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends there should be one nurse per school or one for every 500 students.</p>

	<p>The issue is even more dire when it comes to psychologists and social workers. Berge says the state only provides enough funds for 1.4 full time psychologists for the entire district and 3.3 full time social workers.</p> <p>Local levy dollars allow for more hiring, but the imbalance is significant in Seattle Public Schools, the state's largest district.</p> <p>Berge says the district is forced to make strategic decisions, noting some school nurse positions are spread among five schools.</p> <p>Berge says this has been an issue for decades and is not relative to the McCleary decision.</p> <p>Washington Governor Jay Inslee has already backed two different bills, including House Bill 1664, which aim to change the formula for funding social and emotional care at schools. The House bill, which has bipartisan support, was advanced out of the Education Committee on Friday. Rep. Alex Ybarra, (R) of Quincy, said simply "We want to help our kids."</p> <p>Berge said the bills, currently, would finance an additional twenty nurses for Seattle Schools.</p> <p>But still lingering is a local levy renewal. SPS is asking voters once again for help in February, with more than \$1.4 billion in property taxes for programs and capital improvements. School levies have traditionally done well in Seattle, and there hasn't been tremendous push back to the proposals on the ballot that have already gone out to voters. The Seattle City Council unanimously approved a resolution on Tuesday to symbolically back the levies.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Covid school outbreaks most from sports</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.king5.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/covid-outbreaks-schools-sports/281-d000e6a2-75d8-4963-884e-0d48f3af25ec">https://www.king5.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/covid-outbreaks-schools-sports/281-d000e6a2-75d8-4963-884e-0d48f3af25ec</a>
GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. — An analysis by the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department reveals most COVID outbreaks in schools are happening outside of classrooms.</p> <p>The overwhelming majority of cases were tied to sports, the department said.</p> <p>In its first report using a new reporting format that considers outbreak locations, 89% of infections were related to athletics. Only 8% were in classrooms.</p> <p>Of the 90 outbreak cases reported this week, 80 were linked to sports, 7 were in classrooms, 3 were tied to other activities, and none were related to transportation, the department said.</p> <p>“We believe this gives you a more accurate picture of school outbreaks,” the department wrote in a <a href="#">blog post</a>.</p> <p>Student-athletes are required to adhere to a set of safety <a href="#">rules</a> during practice and competition, which vary from sport to sport, but many participants are often in close contact, unmasked.</p> <p>CDC <a href="#">guidance</a> for schools advises districts to cancel high-risk sports and activities, like football, wrestling, and band.</p> <p>Washington has not gone that far, but the Department of Health, which is helping coordinate testing in schools, is encouraging districts to protect learning over extracurricular activities.</p> <p>“We have been working with our schools to remind them that the most critical aspect of where testing should be employed is really to make sure that kids are remaining in the classroom,” said Dr. Umair Shah, Secretary of Health.</p>

HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Omicron to plateau mid-March?</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://komonews.com/news/local/end-in-sight-omicron-projected-to-plateau-in-march">https://komonews.com/news/local/end-in-sight-omicron-projected-to-plateau-in-march</a>
GIST	<p>SEATTLE- New numbers show more than 1,000 new COVID-19 infections across the state, according to the WA Department of Health.</p> <p>Plus 109 new deaths and another 20 new hospitalizations.</p> <p>These numbers are coming down, but hospital staff are still stretched very thin, with large numbers of covid patients. But the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation team at U.W. Medicine says up to 50 percent of those hospitalizations are people suffering from something in addition to COVID-19.</p> <p>"If you get admitted and test positive even if you were there for a heart attack and you die, you show up in one of the categories for Covid death," Dr. Christopher Murray, the director of the team said.</p> <p>So, even though this omicron surge is sending people to the hospital and creating a massive amount of infections, Dr. Murray says only a fraction of those positive tests end up in the hospital, a much lower number than with Delta or other variants. And unlike other variants, omicron cases go up very quickly and fall back down almost as quickly.</p> <p>These data points are part of what led the team to predict the United States will reach a plateau of cases in early March; Washington state, about mid-March, signaling an end to the pandemic.</p> <p>"So, I think we will go back to normal in the sense that we won't have major restrictions on behavior," said Dr. Murray.</p> <p>The virus will still be with us, he says, but more in a seasonal flu kind of way, leaving masking and social distancing up to individuals.</p> <p>"Even if you protect yourself and decrease your risk by 50 percent, which is what a mask probably does, you're still going to get exposed multiple times to omicron. It's that prevalent in the community," he said.</p> <p>So, if omicron is not overtaken by another variant, what will covid-19 look like next winter?</p> <p>"Our long-range models show a winter surge next winter in the northern hemisphere but of course you know that can be entirely overcome by the emergence of a new variant," said Dr. Murray.</p> <p>But currently, he says they're not modeling that. So, given all this new information, if the end is near, is it okay to gather with others, return to what some consider normal activities?</p> <p>"Personally, I'm going to be cautious until the wave is through, with just a few weeks away. So why, in a world of uncertainty, why take any risk? Once the wave is through, I think that everybody will have to make their own choice and it sort of goes back to, take a bad flu season, like 2017-2018 in the winter which was a bad U.S. flu season, what type of differences in behavior did you pursue when there was a bad flu around?" he said.</p> <p>Some, at that time, he said did choose to avoid crowds and stay inside and several people likely decided to get the flu vaccine.</p> <p>There's also been debate as to whether not delta could re-emerge, but so Dr. Murray says the data shows that omicron provides reasonable protection against that happening.</p>
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SOURCE	<a href="https://komonews.com/news/local/record-number-of-workers-have-called-out-sick-exacerbating-labor-shortage">https://komonews.com/news/local/record-number-of-workers-have-called-out-sick-exacerbating-labor-shortage</a>
GIST	<p>A record number of workers have missed work during the pandemic-- making a labor shortage crisis even more dire.</p> <p>According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in late December and early January alone, there have been nearly nine million sick calls nationwide linked to COVID-19.</p> <p>There have been nearly 84,000 calls in Washington, and nearly 54,000 in Seattle.</p> <p>In some parts of South Lake Union, there's a restaurant on virtually every street corner. Inside Portage Bay Cafe, co- owner John Gunnar is much busier than usual. Because of a labor shortage, he's wearing multiple hats.</p> <p>Omicron variant cases are taking a big bite out of the workforce in many industries--especially restaurants.</p> <p>"More people are getting sick. More people are calling out," said Gunnar.</p> <p>That is forcing Gunnar to juggle schedules and shuffle around employees among his four restaurant locations.</p> <p>"Today, I had to move some employees from our 65th location to our Ballard location because they were down to just two cooks," said Gunnar.</p> <p>According to the U.S. Census Bureau, an exceptional number of people have been out sick with COVID-19 or they were out caring for someone who was sick.</p> <p>It's making a bad staffing shortage even worse.</p> <p>"It's just like getting hit and hit and just getting tired of it," Gunnar said.</p> <p>At Pike Place Market, many restaurants are also feeling the squeeze.</p> <p>Some places are still struggling to fill critical jobs, let alone keep their doors open.</p> <p>At Emmett Watson's Oyster Bar, a single sick call can be detrimental says owner Thurman Bryant.</p> <p>"A gentleman who works for us a couple days a week; he called out sick.so we just had to close that day," said Bryant.</p> <p>Bryant said it's the same story for many other restaurants.</p> <p>"One of the other places--they had to close for two days because they had so many people calling out sick," said Bryant. "I've been here 44 years and I haven't seen anything close to this."</p> <p>With fewer people available to work, many restaurants have been forced to close earlier or open fewer days. They've had to stream-line their menu to make things easier for staff.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 National Guard at hard-hit hospitals</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://komonews.com/news/local/national-guard-now-in-place-at-hard-hit-local-hospitals">https://komonews.com/news/local/national-guard-now-in-place-at-hard-hit-local-hospitals</a>
GIST	EVERETT, Wash. — Reinforcements have arrived for some of the most overwhelmed hospitals across the state.



As of Friday, teams from the Washington National Guard are on the ground at Harborview Medical Center and Providence Regional Medical Center Everett.

They may be decked out in camouflage instead of scrubs, but the work the members of the National Guard will do could make all the difference for the medical staff.

"Well it's busy and it's good to have help all the time anyway because it's been busy," said Marian Hagi as she hurried in to start her shift at Providence Regional Medical Center.

While COVID-19 infections rates are showing signs of slowing down, the number of hospitalized patients at Providence in Everett is hitting new heights. Inpatient capacity is spilling over at 110 percent and ICU beds are swamped at 104 percent capacity.

"We still have patients in the hallway," said Danny Masih, a cardiac sonographer at Providence. "They are still waiting for their rooms and the hospital is overflowing."

To help ease the burden on overworked nurses and medical technicians, a National Guard unit will help check-in patients, restock supplies, assist with N95 mask fitting and handle patient transports in the emergency department.

"You spend a lot of your time doing a lot of little tasks like transport and moving things around and supply delivery and everything else. Definitely much better going to patient care," said Dalyn Larsen, an electronic imaging technician.

A separate National Guard team at Harborview will focus on COVID-19 testing.

Taken together it should help buy back time for overworked medical personnel and make sure that people hospitalized with COVID can get the best care available.

"We really want to thank them for providing that extra help and serving the people," said Ben Masih, also a cardiac sonographer at Providence.

Gov. Jay Inslee authorized this National Guard mobilization for eight hard-hit hospitals across the state with a mission set to last for one month.

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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Seattle CPC condemns Seattle PD 2020 ruse</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.q13fox.com/news/seattle-community-police-commission-releases-statement-on-spds-proud-boy-ruse-during-2020-protests">https://www.q13fox.com/news/seattle-community-police-commission-releases-statement-on-spds-proud-boy-ruse-during-2020-protests</a>
GIST	<p><b>SEATTLE</b> - An organization aimed at reforming Seattle Police Department practices has condemned the department for deciding to issue fake radio transmissions saying that the Proud Boys were marching in downtown, causing alarm in already-tense protests in 2020.</p> <p>Earlier this month, it was discovered that <a href="#">Seattle police</a> exchanged detailed fake radio transmissions about a nonexistent group of menacing right-wing extremists at a <a href="#">crucial moment during 2020 racial justice protests</a>, an investigation by the city's police watchdog group shows.</p> <p>The approved "misinformation effort" happened June 8, 2020, hours after the police department abandoned its <a href="#">East Precinct</a> and as protesters were starting to set up the temporary zone that was later called the <a href="#">Capitol Hill Organized Protest, or CHOP</a>.</p> <p>The <a href="#">officers who participated</a> described a group gathering by City Hall and delivered reports such as, "It looks like a few of them might be open carrying," and: "Hearing from the Proud Boys group. ... They may be looking for somewhere else for confrontation."</p>

Though some people in the zone may have brought guns regardless of the chatter, the ruse "improperly added fuel to the fire," Office of Police Accountability Director Andrew Myerberg concluded in a report released Jan. 5.

In response, the Seattle Community Police Commission (SCPC) condemned the actions. SCPC is an organization that was formed from a mandate in 2017 to provide community input on needed reforms.

**In a statement, SCPC said:**

*"We, Seattle's Community Police Commission, write to condemn the Seattle Police Department's decision to falsely claim—at the height of the protests against George Floyd's murder—that armed groups of white nationalists were marching towards protestors. This lie, which came one day after a protestor was shot, was irresponsible, unprofessional, unethical, and unacceptable.*

*It almost certainly escalated tensions in the CHOP/CHAZ, impacted other City departments, had a chilling effect on free speech, and, in hindsight, raises the specter of the six SPD officers who participated in the January 6 attempted coup. The officers responsible for and involved in this ruse must be held accountable, far beyond the recommendations of the OPA investigation, which sustained findings only for two police supervisors—both of whom are no longer with SPD—and none of the other four officers who were involved.*

*In 2018, a Seattle resident died by suicide after he was the target of an SPD ruse. After that incident, OPA recommended improved training for SPD officers; clearly those efforts were insufficient. Mayor Harrell and the City Council must work together to pass robust accountability legislation that prevents officers from using ruses in our City.*

*The fact that this investigation was completed in September 2021 but not released until December 30, 2021 is concerning in and of its own. It raises questions about why no one in SPD exposed the ruse earlier, why OPA delayed the release of its investigation, how that delay negatively impacted the outcomes and potential findings that could lead to officer discipline, and broader concerns about the recent announcement that OPA Director Myerberg has been appointed Public Safety Director in the Harrell Administration."*

It appears unlikely that anyone involved will face punitive actions. The two employees who ordered and supervised the misinformation effort and who Myerberg sustained allegations of policy violations against have left the department, according to the case summary.

There was no investigation into the hoax until late 2020, when Converge Media journalist Omari Salisbury asked OPA for body camera video from the officers who had supposedly tailed the Proud Boys group. OPA couldn't locate any relevant video and launched an investigation.

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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Omicron surge takes toll childcare centers</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.q13fox.com/news/omicron-surge-takes-toll-on-washington-childcare-centers">https://www.q13fox.com/news/omicron-surge-takes-toll-on-washington-childcare-centers</a>
GIST	<p><b>TUMWATER, Wash.</b> - Child care centers in Washington are at a breaking point as <a href="#">Omicron</a> continues to shake the industry.</p> <p>Serendipity Children's Center Owner Lynnette McCarty said these last few weeks have been the hardest yet.</p> <p>"I can't even compare this last month though with the last two years. This has been brutal," McCarty said.</p> <p>She's now scared of the challenges this <a href="#">new variant brings</a> and the tough decisions she could be forced to make all while keeping children safe.</p> <p>"We already made it through a crisis, building back up losing staff, staff shortage," McCarty said.</p>

Now, childcare owners like her have to [deal with the Omicron variant](#).

"I'm afraid, I'm nervous, I'm stressed out to the max and so is all my staff," McCarty said.

McCarty has been in childcare for 32 years. She said the last two years of the pandemic have been brutal, but this new variant is threatening the industry she loves.

She said her daycares in Olympia and Tumwater have tried to stay afloat through PPP loans and even by raising the price of childcare for several reasons; one, to keep up with the incentives other businesses are offering and two, to offset costs.

But as [more children test positive](#), McCarty said she's having to take precautions.

"We've been closing a room a day," McCarty said.

Out of 10 classrooms, she says seven of them are closed for close contact.

Now, parents in the area are left without childcare.

As a business, she says it's also impacting them.

"We have to pay back what the days that they're not using and so now, we're behind a month. If you don't have money left, you're out of business," McCarty said.

She says she can do handle the ongoing situation for a month or two – but not three.

The pandemic is also forcing parents, like Dave McGrath, to make life-changing decisions.

"I actually went to work for the school district that he goes to, because it's just the easiest thing," McGrath said of his 10-year-old son.

He previously pulled him out of daycare, fearing the unknown and left the workforce. But he's not the only one, according to Regional Labor Economist with the Employment Security Department Anneliese Vance-Sherman.

"We've got about 25,000 people that have left the labor force," Vance-Sherman said.

She says the main reason – lack of child care, and the industry still struggling to recover.

"If this lasts for a period of months, if we don't get it under control, I think we're going to be in serious trouble," McCarty said.

Economists say as this new wave hits our community, they anticipate more childcare centers to close – and employment to dip – yet they're optimistic things won't be as bad as they were in [April of 2020](#).

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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Covid surge halts elective surgeries</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.q13fox.com/news/covid-19-surge-halts-elective-surgeries-for-thousands-of-washingtonians-including-cancer-survivor">https://www.q13fox.com/news/covid-19-surge-halts-elective-surgeries-for-thousands-of-washingtonians-including-cancer-survivor</a>
GIST	<b>SEATTLE</b> - Several thousands of people in Washington are <a href="#">waiting for elective surgeries and procedures</a> as a result of the pandemic and as the state sees its highest transmission rate ever.  With historic case numbers filling the hospitals, patients waiting for non-urgent procedures wonder when they will ever receive care.

"I just want to get back a sense of normalcy. I know I'm not the only one," said Shannon McAndrews, a cancer survivor, who is waiting for a surgery that would complete a very long journey since her diagnosis of stage two breast cancer.

"It would be life-changing. I have been waiting since the day I was diagnosed to put this behind me. I lost my mom to metastatic breast cancer when I was 20 years old and I know the impact that takes on your family," said McAndrews.

McAndrews was diagnosed in April 2020. She currently lives in eastern Washington, but grew up in western Washington. Shannon said she felt she would receive the best care in Seattle and decided to begin her treatment in the city. She traveled back and forth to undergo 20 weeks of chemotherapy, a double mastectomy and then another surgery to remove cancerous lymph nodes from both armpits. She stayed in Seattle with her two young children to complete five weeks of daily radiation therapy.

"Thankfully, we had a family member over there who welcomed us into her home, kind of took us in and took care of us while my husband stayed in eastern Washington and worked and made money for our family and our medical bills," she said.

After finishing radiation therapy, McAndrews' final step to life after cancer was reconstructive surgery. She [said the procedure](#) would use tissue from her stomach and be transplanted to her chest.

"The [procedure is 10-12 hours](#) and requires multiple surgeons because of the extent of the surgery and the amount of time it takes," said McAndrews.

It's an appointment challenging to get. And once she did, [doctors had to postpone it](#). This was due to a record number of COVID-19 cases overwhelming hospitals across Washington, and the state putting a pause on all elective surgeries.

"It was kind of a gut punch. It took the wind out of my sails for sure," she said. "Pretty devastated about the setback. And it just is frustrating when I've been doing everything that I'm supposed to do. My family has been quarantining. And we have made sure we are being cautious and that we all stay healthy. And then this happens."

She said the [reconstructive surgery](#) is rescheduled for November 2022, but is hopeful she may not have to wait that long.

Though Omicron infection rates are the worst the state has seen throughout the pandemic, scientists said it may be the key to an endemic. During a media briefing on Friday, world-renowned [Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation](#) said its new projections show the pandemic—from a policy standpoint—could end as early as this spring in the U.S.

"We think that because this [Omicron] wave will move quickly through the population, we will go into this period where the immunological exposure to COVID is so much higher—both from vaccination and infection—that we won't see restrictions return. So, I think we will go back to normal in the sense that we won't have major restrictions on behavior, and that COVID becomes endemic. It just becomes a disease that we will have to manage," said [Dr. Christopher Murray](#), of IHME.

It's promising news for McAndrews, hoping to put the pandemic and cancer behind her, sooner than later.

"Oh my gosh! Yeah, if I could get in sooner than November, I told the person who called me the other day I will be ready tomorrow! I've been waiting for 16 months, I would hate to have to wait for two years for surgery," said McAndrews. "Just to be able to check this surgery off the list and move forward with our lives would just mean everything and be so helpful. I've been waiting a really long time."

HEADLINE	01/24 Fake Mossad job sites target Iran spies?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.thedailybeast.com/shady-network-of-fake-mossad-job-sites-target-iranian-spies?ref=home">https://www.thedailybeast.com/shady-network-of-fake-mossad-job-sites-target-iranian-spies?ref=home</a>
GIST	<p>The headhunters at VIP Human Solutions have a unique pitch for those working in sensitive security jobs in Hezbollah and the Assad regime: Come work for us in Israel.</p> <p>Underneath a picture of the Israeli flag and a contact number with an Israeli country code, VIP Human Solutions' website advertises itself as the "VIP center for recruitment of the most distinguished in the military and security services of Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon" that "specializes in research and consultancies in the studies of security and political science in all corners of the world." For those with the right experience, Human Solutions' headhunters promise fast hiring and big salaries.</p> <p>VIP Human Solutions' website is one of 16 such sites that use the same pitch, phrasing, logos, phone numbers, and, for some, web infrastructure over the past four years to lure former spies and soldiers in Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah to come work for Israel. Intelligence experts say the crude and clumsy sites are fakes, with no plausible connection to Israel's spy services. But the bogus recruiters' websites have nonetheless endured, surfacing and disappearing at a number of hosts over the same four-year period to pitch to internet users in Iran, Syria, and Lebanon through Google Ads.</p> <p>The Daily Beast was unable to attribute the jobs sites to any particular actor or determine their true purpose. But at least one group of Iran-focused cybersecurity researchers say they suspect the intelligence jobs sites are part of a counterintelligence effort run by Iran-linked operators.</p> <p>Amin Sabeti, a cybersecurity expert and the director of <a href="#">Computer Emergency Response Team in Farsi</a> (CERTFA), believes the job sites are "a honey trap by the [Iranian] regime to identify the potential people interested in working with the foreign intelligence services."</p> <p>Nor have they gone unnoticed in Iran, where social media users have expressed their anger and confusion over being targeted for recruitment by Google Ads purporting to come from one of Tehran's adversaries.</p> <p>The Daily Beast found the sites as part of an investigation into a series of apparent phishing websites that spoofed think tanks and news organizations focused on the Middle East and national security. Those sites include domains meant to trick users into believing they were associated with think tanks like the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, Stimson Center, Gatestone Institute, and the Israel-based Begin-Sadat Center and news outlets like the <i>Jerusalem Post</i>, Business Insider, and the United Arab Emirates-based <i>Khaleej Times</i>.</p> <p>Neither The Daily Beast, the cybersecurity firm Mandiant, nor Google or Facebook, where the sites had accounts, were able to identify who's behind the phishing domains. Telegram, which hosted messaging accounts for the fake jobs sites, did not respond to questions from The Daily Beast.</p> <p>But the think tank and news phishing sites share at least some behavioral similarities to a previously documented phishing campaign waged by an Iranian intelligence-linked hacking group, according to cybersecurity experts.</p> <p><b>Email trail</b></p> <p>The Daily Beast found the phishing domains and job sites after Lahav Harkov, the <i>Jerusalem Post</i>'s diplomatic correspondent, warned Twitter users in December 2021 that a fake domain imitating the Israeli newspaper's website was sending out emails in her name. The emails, shared with The Daily Beast by the reporter, used clunky English to reach out to Iran-focused academics and tried to set up interviews with the fake <i>Post</i> reporter on topics like "Gulf countries have a desire to normalize relations with Israel!"</p>

By sifting through a list of websites that used the same somewhat unique pattern of commercial website services found on the fake *Jerusalem Post* site, The Daily Beast was able to find a number of similarly themed spoofs.

Only two other websites shared the same IP address as the fake *Jerusalem Post* domain—a similar spoof of *Khaleej Times*, a UAE newspaper, and an apparent fake login site for Google Drive.

The fake *Jerusalem Post*'s email provider, the company which registered the site's domain name, and the provider of its name server—used to resolve the site's name to an IP address—were all popular commercial companies. Thousands of legitimate websites use each of these companies' services but a search of DomainTools' IRIS cybersecurity database showed that only 68 websites currently use the same combination of those three companies' services.

Within that set of 68 sites, the vast majority are legitimate, but a handful—all hosted by a Bulgarian web hosting firm named Belcloud—are suspicious and potentially malicious—including fake websites for Middle East and security-focused think tanks, news organizations, and the VIP Human Solutions job site. Belcloud did not respond to questions from The Daily Beast in time for publication.

Three of the fake think tank websites—spoofing Quincy, Gatestone, and the Begin-Sadat center—are hosted at the same IP address with slightly misspelled URLs or differing top level domains (for example, copying a site's name on the .net domain instead of .org).

Other apparent phishing domains, like a fake Business Insider domain created in July 2020, briefly shared the same IP address at Belcloud with the phony Quincy Institute domain.

The Daily Beast shared its research with the cybersecurity firm Mandiant. In a statement, the company said it couldn't say who's behind the phishing websites but did note that some of the "activity reflects [tactics, techniques, and procedures] we most closely associated with the threat actor UNC788," a designation for a hacking activity [believed to be associated](#) with Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security.

In 2020, cybersecurity [researchers at CERTFA uncovered an attempt](#) by what it concluded were hackers linked to the Ministry of Intelligence and Security which "targeted journalists, political and human rights activists" with a similar pitch to set up an interview sent by the fake *Post* reporter, Harkov. CERTFA researchers found that the hackers would use the interview pitch to build trust with a target before sending a fake Google login page meant to trick recipients into revealing their passwords.

Like the fake think tank and news sites uncovered by The Daily Beast, the sites CERTFA found in 2020 were also hosted at Belcloud. One of the phishing domains found by CERTFA on Belcloud and linked to Iranian intelligence—a fake Google Drive login site—was recently hosted at the same IP address as the fake *Jerusalem Post* and *Khaleej Times* sites—although The Daily Beast could not determine whether the site is still operated by the same owners who ran it when researchers linked it to Iran.

While neither The Daily Beast nor Mandiant could attribute the sites to any individual, group, or country, Sabeti says he's personally convinced that it's the work of "Charming Kitten," the nickname for the Iran-linked hacking group known to target Western officials, journalists, dissidents, and human rights activists and believes the domains show the group has "increased the scope of its target and operations in recent months."

### **Headhunters?**

The VIP Human Solutions site, while not hosted on Belcloud, uses the same pattern of infrastructure consumer choice as the phishing domains. And since 2018, at least 16 remarkably similar jobs websites have used the same logo and pitch language to try and recruit former spies and military personnel in Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah for what purports to be an Israeli "consulting" firm.



It's unclear if all of the sites are operated by the same entity but a number of them share the same Google Analytics account (used to monitor web traffic) and some of the sites list the same Israel-based phone number and Telegram accounts for applicants to reach them.

The earliest iteration of a VIP Human Solutions-branded website appeared in 2018 and came with an associated Facebook page and YouTube account advertising the high-paying "consulting" jobs to former Iranian intelligence, security, and cybersecurity veterans. After The Daily Beast shared its finding with Facebook, the company removed the page pending identity verification but could not attribute it to any particular actor.

It's not clear what the purpose of the websites are but intelligence experts are skeptical that Israel's intelligence services have anything to do with them given their broad, indiscreet, and amateurish pitches. Douglas London, a 34-year veteran of the CIA's clandestine service and author of [The Recruiter](#), a recent memoir about his career in espionage and the Middle East, told The Daily Beast that it's unlikely the site is run by Israeli intelligence.

"On the surface, I'm doubtful that this is the work of any sophisticated intelligence service, let alone Israel. They don't have to do this," London said.

"In the internet era, where you have LinkedIn or Indeed.com, any sophisticated service has access to that, whether directly or indirectly. A potential target probably already has their resume out there and intelligence services can use computers to sift through that."

London also pointed out that the blatant Israeli associations advertised on the sites [contrast with the public reporting](#) on how Israeli intelligence services often recruit agents in Arab countries and Iran.

"Israel tends to use a lot of false flag recruitment operations that disguises the fact that targets are working for Israel. They pretend to be American, British, or Canadians because it's more palatable for Arabs and Iranians to work for Americans."

What's even more odd about the sites is that Iran doesn't block them, says Sabeti, the director of CERTFA. "Many Israeli websites are blocked in Iran, and it would be odd that a website that tries to recruit agents from Iran is not."

Iranian authorities have had ample time and opportunity to notice the sites and block them if they wished. Social media users in Iran have frequently posted about their confusion when encountering Google Ads for the sites and Mashregh News, an Iranian news outlet close to the country's intelligence and military establishment, published an article about them in December 2020, which speculated that they were a Mossad attempt to recruit Iranian spies [on illicit gambling and game apps](#).

Whoever is behind the thinly veiled attempt, they're not talking. The Daily Beast reached out to the sites through submission forms, WhatsApp, and Telegram messages but received no response.

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HEADLINE	01/24 Australia PM loses control WeChat account
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/news-report-australian-leaders-wechat-account-82429997">https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/news-report-australian-leaders-wechat-account-82429997</a>
GIST	<p>CANBERRA, Australia -- Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has lost control of his account on the Chinese-owned social media platform WeChat and a lawmaker on Monday accused China's leaders of political interference.</p> <p>Morrison's 76,000 WeChat followers were notified his page had been renamed "Australian Chinese new life" earlier this month and his photograph had been removed, Sydney's The Daily Telegraph newspaper reported. The changes were made without the government's knowledge, the report said.</p> <p>Morrison's office declined to comment on the report.</p>



In response to a question from The Associated Press, WeChat's parent company Tencent said that there was "no evidence of any hacking or third-party intrusion," related to Morrison's account.

"Based on our information, this appears to be a dispute over account ownership," the company said.

In accordance with Chinese regulations, Morrison's public account was registered with a Chinese citizen and was later transferred to its current operator, the company said. It identified the present owner of the account only as a "technology services company," adding that it would "continue to look into this matter further."

Joint Parliamentary Committee on Intelligence and Security Chair James Paterson said WeChat had not immediately replied to an Australian government request that the prime minister's account be restored.

Paterson accused the Chinese Communist Party of censoring the prime minister with Australia's elections due by May.

Paterson, who is a member of Morrison's conservative Liberal Party, called on all lawmakers to boycott the platform.

"What the Chinese government has done by shutting down an Australian account is foreign interference of Australian democracy in an election year," Paterson said.

Paterson said it was concerning that 1.2 million Chinese Australians who use the platform couldn't access news from the prime minister, but could still see criticisms of the government made by opposition leader Anthony Albanese.

Fergus Ryan, a Chinese social media expert with the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, tweeted that Morrison was one of at least a dozen Australian politicians who use WeChat accounts now registered to Chinese citizens.

Liberal Party lawmaker and former diplomat Dave Sharma said the interference was likely sanctioned by the Chinese government.

Sharma said Morrison used WeChat to connect with Australia's Chinese diaspora, but that ultimately the social media platform is controlled by the Chinese Communist Party.

"More likely than not it was state-sanctioned and it shows the attitude towards free speech and freedom of expression that comes out of Beijing," Sharma said.

Graeme Smith, a China expert at the Australian National University, said it was unclear who was behind Morrison's WeChat problems.

"I don't think we know who's behind this. I dare say we could safely say it was at least inspired by the China government," Smith said.

Smith added he did not believe that Morrison's WeChat problem was evidence that China would back Albanese's center-left Labor Party at the next election.

"They really couldn't care less who wins the election," Smith said. "They don't care who wins as long as people don't trust democracy."

Albanese said he would talk to Morrison about "any national security implications" of the prime minister's WeChat problem.

Morrison has had a vexed relationship with China since he replaced Malcolm Turnbull as prime minister in 2018.

	The Chinese have been critical of a new partnership involving Australia, Britain and the United States announced in September under which Australia will be provided with nuclear-powered submarines.
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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 Patriot Front got hacked; dirty laundry aired</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2022/01/data-leak-from-neo-nazi-site-shows-members-conspiring-in-hate-crimes/">https://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2022/01/data-leak-from-neo-nazi-site-shows-members-conspiring-in-hate-crimes/</a>
GIST	<p>Chat messages, images, and videos leaked from the server of a white supremacist group called Patriot Front purport to show its leader and rank-and-file members conspiring in hate crimes, despite their claims that they are a legitimate political organization.</p> <p><a href="#">Patriot Front</a>, or PF, formed in the aftermath of the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in which one attendee rammed his car into a crowd of counterprotesters, killing one and injuring 35 others. PF founder Thomas Rousseau started the group after an image posted online showed the now-convicted killer, James Alex Fields Jr., <a href="#">posing</a> with members of white supremacist group Vanguard America shortly before the attack. Vanguard America soon dissolved, and Rousseau rebranded it as PF with the goal of hiding any involvement in violent acts.</p> <p>Since then, PF has strived to present itself as a group of patriots who are aligned with the ideals and values of America's 18th-century founders. In <a href="#">announcing</a> the formation of PF in 2017, Rousseau wrote: <i>The new name was carefully chosen, as it serves several purposes. It can help inspire sympathy among those more inclined to fence-sitting, and can be easily justified to our ideology [sic] and worldview. The original American patriots were nothing short of revolutionaries. The word patriot itself comes from the same root as paternal and patriarch. It means loyalty to something intrinsically based in blood.</i></p> <p><b>Turbo cans and rubber roofing cement</b></p> <p>But a <a href="#">published report</a> and <a href="#">leaked data</a> the report is based on present a starkly different picture. The chat messages, images, and videos purport to show Rousseau and other PF members discussing the defacing of numerous murals and monuments promoting Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ groups, and other social justice causes.</p> <p><a href="#">This chat</a>, for instance, appears to show a PF member discussing how to deface a civil rights mural in Detroit. When a member asks what the best way is to fully cover up a mural with paint, Rousseau is shown replying, "It's in the stencil guide. Turbo cans." The stencil guide refers to <a href="#">these instructions</a> provided to PF members showing how to effectively use spray paint and not get caught. The PF member also sent Rousseau <a href="#">pictures</a> taken while scouting the mural.</p> <p>When a different member discussed whether rubber roofing cement could be used to cover a George Floyd memorial that had been treated with antigraffiti clear coating, Rousseau allegedly <a href="#">responded</a>: "Keep me posted as to your research and practice with this substance. Orders will be given out at the event."</p> <p>The data dump also appears to document the defacing of a monument in Olympia, Washington.</p> <p>The leaked data purports to show a range of other illegal activities the group discussed. They include Rousseau informing members planning a rally in the District of Columbia that one participant will call 911 from a burner phone and make a <a href="#">false report to authorities</a>.</p> <p>"He will cite that there is a protest, he sees shields BUT NO WEAPONS, and everyone involved appears to be behaving peacefully, waving and handing out flyers, nonetheless he is a concerned citizen and suggests the police take a look into it to ensure everyone's civil rights are safe," Rousseau appeared to write. "He will add that it looks like we just arrived from the metro. This will soften the police up before our big visual contact on the bridge, and provide a little confusion and misinfo that's within the realm of honest dialogue."</p>

	<p>Attempts to reach Rousseau or other PF members were not successful.</p> <p>Friday's published report said that the leak comprised about 400GB of data and came from a self-hosted instance of RocketChat, an open source chat server that's similar to Slack and Discord. It's only the latest example of a hate group being hacked and its private discussions being dumped online. In 2019, the <a href="#">breach of the Iron March website</a> revealed, among other things, that many of its members were members of the US Marines, Navy, Army, and military reserves.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Airline CEOs U-turn: 5G not big problem</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2022/01/airline-ceos-make-u-turn-now-say-5g-isnt-a-big-problem-for-altimeters/">https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2022/01/airline-ceos-make-u-turn-now-say-5g-isnt-a-big-problem-for-altimeters/</a>
GIST	<p>The Federal Aviation Administration's fight against AT&amp;T's and Verizon's new 5G deployment appears to be coming to a temporary close, with the FAA having cleared about 78 percent of US planes for landing in low-visibility conditions. Airline CEOs are striking an upbeat tone, with one saying the process of ensuring that airplane altimeters work in 5G areas is "really not that complicated."</p> <p>Over the past week, the FAA <a href="#">announced clearances for 13 altimeters</a> that can filter out 5G transmissions from the C-band spectrum that is licensed to wireless operators, accounting for those used by all Boeing 717, 737, 747, 757, 767, 777, 787, and MD-10/-11 models; all Airbus A300, A310, A319, A320, A330, A340, A350, and A380 models; and some Embraer 170 and 190 regional jets. More approvals will presumably be announced soon, bringing the US closer to 100 percent capacity.</p> <p>Unfortunately, there could be another showdown in about six months, when AT&amp;T and Verizon lift temporary 5G restrictions around airports—we'll cover that later in this article. For now, airline CEOs appear to be satisfied, even though the FAA hasn't said definitively that altimeters will continue working after the temporary 5G limits around airports are lifted.</p> <p><b>No "material disruption going forward"</b></p> <p>"It's taken a while to get to the right spot, but I feel like we're in the right spot," American Airlines Doug Parker said yesterday, according to a <a href="#">CNN article</a>. "I don't think you're going to see any material disruption going forward because of this."</p> <p>"While I wish it happened earlier, the good news is we now have everyone engaged, the FAA and DOT at the highest levels, the... aircraft manufacturers, airlines, and the telecoms," United Airlines CEO Scott Kirby said. "While we don't have a final resolution quite yet, I'm confident we'll get there."</p> <p>"The technical experts that are working on it tell us it's really not that complicated once they all are able to share information and work on it," Parker also said. "So they seem encouraged that we'll be able to address this in a way that allows for full deployment of 5G, including near airports. I don't expect until we get to the point that everyone is really comfortable that you'll see anything turned on near airports, because no one wants to go through this again."</p> <p>These statements marked a sudden shift, coming just three days after Parker and Kirby signed a <a href="#">letter</a> claiming that 5G on the C-band would cause "catastrophic disruption" to air travel.</p> <p><b>FAA waited almost two years to test altimeters</b></p> <p>The biggest recent development is that the FAA finally started a process to evaluate and approve altimeters after <a href="#">claiming without proof</a> that 5G on C-Band spectrum (3.7 to 3.98 GHz) would disrupt altimeters that use spectrum from 4.2 GHz to 4.4 GHz. While the Federal Communications Commission created a 220 MHz guard band to protect airplane equipment, poorly built altimeters may be unable to filter out transmissions from other spectrum bands.</p> <p>The FAA didn't start its process of evaluating the actual altimeters used by airplanes <a href="#">after February 2020</a>, when the Federal Communications Commission approved the use of C-Band spectrum for 5G. The FAA</p>

also didn't start this evaluation process after the [FCC auctioned off the spectrum](#) to wireless carriers in February 2021. Instead, the FAA continued arguing that 5G deployment should be blocked long after carriers started preparing their equipment and towers to use the C-band.

Harold Feld, a long-time telecom attorney and senior VP of consumer-advocacy group Public Knowledge, told Ars today that the FAA should have started setting up the process to evaluate altimeters shortly after the FCC approved the use of the spectrum for 5G—or, at the very latest, shortly after the \$81 billion spectrum auction went forward.

"They spent their time relitigating the whole thing," Feld said. "It was rash and reckless for the FAA to proceed without any kind of plan B. Had not Secretary [of Transportation Pete] Buttigieg personally intervened and the White House personally intervened and forced the FAA to actually stand this process up, then they still wouldn't have stood it up on their own."

### **FCC deemed C-band safe to use**

Nearly two years ago, the FCC found that C-band spectrum was safe to use, in part because [T-Mobile showed](#) that airline-industry research did not investigate whether interference would occur in any realistic scenario. Still, the FCC imposed power limits in the 220 MHz guard band—which is actually 400 MHz this year because carriers are not yet deploying on the upper part of their licensed spectrum. C-band spectrum is also being used for 5G in about 40 other countries without reports of interference to altimeters.

"[W]ell-designed equipment should not ordinarily receive any significant interference (let alone harmful interference) given these circumstances," the FCC said when it approved 5G usage with the 220 MHz guard band. The FCC also pointed out that the 220 MHz guard band "is double the minimum guard band requirement discussed in initial comments by Boeing and ASRC [Aviation Spectrum Resources]."

### **Fight may not be over**

As previously noted, there could be another showdown later this year when AT&T and Verizon lift temporary 5G restrictions around airports. One of the FAA's statements this week seems to indicate that its approvals for altimeters are good for only as long as those voluntary restrictions are in place. "The new safety buffer announced Tuesday around airports in the 5G deployment further expanded the number of airports available to planes with previously cleared altimeters to perform low-visibility landings," the FAA [said on Wednesday](#).

If "previously cleared altimeters" can only work properly at airports with the newly announced buffer zone, then the FAA presumably hasn't determined whether those altimeters will work after carriers deploy C-band 5G without the voluntary limits that go beyond FCC requirements.

We asked the FAA today if this means that the current approvals only apply for as long as the "safety buffer" and other temporary 5G limits are in place and whether new FAA approvals will be needed after temporary restrictions are lifted. The FAA did not answer those questions directly but told Ars, "The buffers around airports reduce 5G signal strengths and allow aircraft to land safely in low-visibility conditions. Prior to these buffers, the signal strength was too strong in certain areas for low-visibility landings to safely occur."

Although the FAA said nothing about needing to grant new approvals later on, its answer today and the statement on Wednesday suggest that the agency is not ready to declare planes safe to land once temporary 5G limits are lifted.

"Wow. It does appear that we are set for another showdown in early July when the current restrictions are supposed to be lifted," telecom consultant Tim Farrar told Ars today after we shared the FAA's response with him. Farrar previously published a [blog post](#) analyzing what he called "the FAA's fearmongering" and slow progress in approving altimeters.

On Twitter, Farrar [wrote](#), "It appears clear from the FAA statements that all [approvals of altimeters] will be invalidated if the 5G deployment restrictions ('safety buffer') are removed."

Feld was disappointed in the FAA's response to Ars, saying that "it looks very much like a non-answer, which unfortunately has been consistent with everything the FAA has done until now." The FAA has exhibited "passive-aggressive behavior where it simply refuses to commit to anything until it has its arms twisted" and is "constantly undermining the idea that there is any finality" with "statements that don't definitively say no," he said.

### **Carrier concessions**

One of the first major concessions from AT&T and Verizon was to implement "C-band radio exclusion zones" around 50 US airports for six months, [until July 5](#). The carriers also delayed their widespread rollout of C-band spectrum from December 5 to January 19.

The new safety buffer appears to be in addition to the previously agreed-to exclusion zones. "At our sole discretion, we have voluntarily agreed to temporarily defer turning on a limited number of towers around certain airport runways as we continue to work with the aviation industry and the FAA to provide further information about our 5G deployment, since they have not utilized the two years they've had to responsibly plan for this deployment," [AT&T told The Hill on Tuesday](#). AT&T explained further that it had "temporarily deferred turning on C-band transmitters within a two-mile radius of the airport runways specified by the FAA." The two-mile radius was requested in the letter signed by Parker, Kirby, and other airline CEOs.

It's not clear whether the safety buffer that carriers agreed to this week will expire on the same six-month timeline. AT&T told Ars today, "We will notify the FAA before any towers are activated within the additional buffer zone announced on Tuesday. We are continuing to engage with the FAA, FCC, and other stakeholders—including providing details about our deployments—to help facilitate the FAA's technical assessments and clearance of aviation equipment." We also contacted Verizon today and will update this article if we get more information.

T-Mobile also purchased C-band spectrum licenses at the FCC auction but isn't deploying on the frequencies until late next year. "We don't anticipate any limitations when we are ready to deploy it in late 2023," T-Mobile [said](#).

### **FAA has more testing to do**

At a minimum, the FAA should already be testing altimeters against the levels of 5G transmissions that will occur near airports in July, Feld said. The FAA also needs to verify that altimeters can continue to work properly after AT&T and Verizon deploy in the upper C-band (from 3.8 GHz to 3.98 GHz) in 2023.

"At this point, it isn't about hypothetical situations with an unknown set of altimeters... You know what the rules are. You know what the altimeters are. You know the date on which we're going to revert to a different set of rules. How the hell can you not know whether these devices are safe or not under the new rules? The only way you can not know is if you refuse to know," Feld said.

Feld also said he finds it "increasingly difficult to understand the FAA's rationale around any of these things, especially given the statements from the [airline] CEOs who actually own and operate this equipment that 'yeah we've done tests, and yeah there's no problem.'"

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HEADLINE	01/22 Molerats hackers new espionage attacks
SOURCE	<a href="https://thehackernews.com/2022/01/molerats-hackers-hiding-new-espionage.html">https://thehackernews.com/2022/01/molerats-hackers-hiding-new-espionage.html</a>
GIST	An active espionage campaign has been attributed to the threat actor known as Molerats that abuses legitimate cloud services like Google Drive and Dropbox to host malware payloads and for command-and-control and the exfiltration of data from targets across the Middle East.

The cyber offensive is believed to have been underway since at least July 2021, [according](#) to cloud-based information security company Zscaler, continuing [previous efforts](#) by the hacking group to conduct reconnaissance on the target hosts and plunder sensitive information.

[Molerats](#), also tracked as TA402, Gaza Hackers Team, and Extreme Jackal, is an advanced persistent threat (APT) group that's largely focused on entities operating in the Middle East. Attack activity associated with the actor has leveraged geopolitical and military themes to entice users to open Microsoft Office attachments and click on malicious links.

The latest campaign detailed by Zscaler is no different in that it makes use of decoy themes related to ongoing conflicts between Israel and Palestine to deliver a .NET backdoor on infected systems that, in turn, takes advantage of the Dropbox API to establish communications with an adversary-controlled server and transmit data.

The implant, which uses specific command codes to commandeer the compromised machine, supports capabilities to take snapshots, list and upload files in relevant directories, and run arbitrary commands. Investigating the attack infrastructure, the researchers said they found at least five Dropbox accounts used for this purpose.

"The targets in this campaign were chosen specifically by the threat actor and they included critical members of banking sector in Palestine, people related to Palestinian political parties, as well as human rights activists and journalists in Turkey," Zscaler ThreatLabz researchers Sahil Antil and Sudeep Singh said.

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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Emotet unconventional IP address formats</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://thehackernews.com/2022/01/emotet-now-using-unconventional-ip.html">https://thehackernews.com/2022/01/emotet-now-using-unconventional-ip.html</a>
GIST	<p>Social engineering campaigns involving the deployment of the Emotet malware botnet have been observed using "unconventional" IP address formats for the first time in a bid to sidestep detection by security solutions.</p> <p>This involves the use of hexadecimal and octal representations of the IP address that, when processed by the underlying operating systems, get automatically converted "to the dotted decimal quad representation to initiate the request from the remote servers," Trend Micro's Threat Analyst, Ian Kenefick, <a href="#">said</a> in a report Friday.</p> <p>The infection chains, as with previous Emotet-related attacks, aim to trick users into enabling document macros and automate malware execution. The document uses Excel 4.0 Macros, a feature that has been <a href="#">repeatedly abused</a> by malicious actors to deliver malware.</p> <p>Once enabled, the macro invokes a URL that's obfuscated with carets, with the host incorporating a hexadecimal representation of the IP address — "h^tt^p^:/^/0xc12a24f5/cc.html" — to execute an HTML application (HTA) code from the remote host.</p> <p>A second variant of the phishing attack follows the same modus operandi, the only difference being that the IP address is now coded in the octal format — "h^tt^p^:/^/0056.0151.0121.0114/c.html".</p> <p>"The unconventional use of hexadecimal and octal IP addresses may result in evading current solutions reliant on pattern matching," Kenefick said. "Evasion techniques like these could be considered evidence of attackers continuing to innovate to thwart pattern-based detection solutions."</p> <p>The development comes amid <a href="#">renewed Emotet activity</a> late last year following a 10-month-long hiatus in the wake of a coordinated <a href="#">law enforcement operation</a>. In December 2021, researchers uncovered evidence of the malware evolving its tactics to <a href="#">drop Cobalt Strike Beacons</a> directly onto compromised systems.</p>



	The findings also arrive as Microsoft revealed plans to disable Excel 4.0 (XLM) Macros by default to safeguard customers against security threats. "This setting now defaults to Excel 4.0 (XLM) macros being disabled in Excel (Build 16.0.14427.10000)," the company <a href="#">announced</a> last week.
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Fake Amazon scheme; exploit 'crypto fever'</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.scmagazine.com/news/cryptocurrency/researchers-detail-fake-amazon-scheme-as-scams-seize-on-crypto-fever">https://www.scmagazine.com/news/cryptocurrency/researchers-detail-fake-amazon-scheme-as-scams-seize-on-crypto-fever</a>
GIST	<p>Researchers on Thursday reported they found continuous cyberattack campaigns that took advantage of so-called "crypto fever" among investors, the most notable an ad on a fake CNBC site that lured people into investing in an <a href="#">Amazon</a> digital token.</p> <p>In a Jan. 20 <a href="#">blog post</a> by Akamai researchers, they said the scam played directly into fear among victims of missing out on a limited-time offer to invest in a new — albeit fake — cryptocurrency. The researchers said the scam played upon the latest sentiments and increasing risk tolerance for crypto investing and lead victims to release their credentials. Akamai said once a victim was engaged, they were led to a well-designed and functional fraudulent website, where they paid for the fake <a href="#">cryptocurrency</a>. The scam asked the victims to use Bitcoin to pay for what were fake tokens.</p> <p>The researchers also noted that they reported their research findings to the Amazon security team — thereby helping to mitigate the scam — and deployed relevant protections for Akamai customers.</p> <p>An Amazon spokesperson said the online retail giant takes any attempts to misuse its brand seriously and noted that <a href="#">it maintains a site</a> to assist customers in identifying scams, including fake pages. Amazon does not currently offer cryptocurrency, nor does it offer promotions in connection with crypto.</p> <p>The psychology of FOMO (fear of missing out) stirs up the emotional urge that if one does not respond quickly enough, they will miss an opportunity that could make one's life better, said Nasser Fattah, chair of the North American Steering Committee at Shared Assessment. Fattah said social engineering attacks often work on emotions — for example, fear, urgency, and curiosity — to hook the victim and make it appealing enough for the victim to take the next steps, such as clicking a malicious link or opening an attachment.</p> <p>"Bitcoin valuation has been the rage in the market, and many in the market missed the opportunity to jump on the Bitcoin bandwagon, and are now chomping at the bit for the next great cryptocurrency," Fattah said. "My advice: be wary of anything that appears too good to be true and do some independent research. Think before you click! "</p> <p>Saryu Nayyar, founder and CEO of Gurukul, said threat actors clearly have multiple evasion techniques that they employ regularly regardless of the objective of the attack campaign, in this case being a fake cryptocurrency offer to solicit legitimate cryptocurrency from unsuspecting users.</p> <p>"Outside of dynamic rendering of page content to avoid detection, many of the techniques used malicious URLs or newly generated phishing domains to block the effectiveness of blacklists," Nayyar said.</p> <p>Some of the IP addresses linked to these attacks have been in use since 2020, added Stephanie Simpson, vice president of product management at Scythe.</p> <p>"This is another example of why we say that not all cyberattacks are sophisticated," Simpson said. "In this case, the IP addresses are known to be malicious, and organizations should block access to them. It's also an example of why organizations need to take real-time threat intelligence about indicators of compromise and continuously test their security controls and processes."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 FBI warns of Diavol ransomware attacks</b>
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SOURCE	<a href="https://www.securityweek.com/fbi-warns-organizations-diavol-ransomware-attacks">https://www.securityweek.com/fbi-warns-organizations-diavol-ransomware-attacks</a>
GIST	<p><b>The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) this week shared a series of indicators of compromise (IoCs) associated with the Diavol ransomware family.</b></p> <p><b>Diavol was initially detailed</b> in July 2021 as a new tool in the arsenal of Wizard Spider, the cybercrime group known for operating the <a href="#">TrickBot</a> botnet and the <a href="#">Conti</a> and <a href="#">Ryuk</a> ransomware families.</p> <p>As part of a typical Diavol attack, in addition to deploying the ransomware to encrypt files on compromised systems, the threat actor claims to exfiltrate the victim's data and uses that as leverage, threatening to publish the data online if the victim doesn't pay the ransom.</p> <p>While Wizard Spider has set up a Tor site on which it names victims and publishes files stolen during Conti ransomware attacks, no data stolen from the organizations targeted with Diavol has been leaked online yet, the <a href="#">FBI says</a>.</p> <p>The Bureau also notes that Diavol ransom payment demands have ranged from \$10,000 to \$500,000 so far and that the attackers showed willingness to engage in negotiations with their victims, ultimately accepting lower payments.</p> <p>Diavol, which employs RSA encryption, was observed focusing on specific file types, based on a list defined by its operators. The malware appends the ".lock64" extension to the encrypted files and drops a ransom note instructing victims to access a Tor website to receive a decryption key.</p> <p>The ransomware was observed generating for each victim computer a unique identifier (which is nearly identical to that employed by TrickBot) and then attempting to connect to a hardcoded command and control (C&amp;C) server.</p> <p>The FBI encourages Diavol victims to share any information they can on the attacks and points out they should not pay a ransom, as that would not guarantee the recovery of the encrypted/stolen data.</p> <p>Organizations can mitigate the risk of ransomware attacks through data backups (including offline, password-protected backups), network segmentation, multi-factor authentication, employee training, and by using anti-malware solutions on all systems.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 OpenSubtitles hacked; data breach</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.hackread.com/opensubtitles-hacked-data-breach-user-leak/">https://www.hackread.com/opensubtitles-hacked-data-breach-user-leak/</a>
GIST	<p>OpenSubtitles is one of the most popular subtitles websites that's the latest victim of hacking leading to a data breach. According to the site admin OSS, a hacker notified them via Telegram in August 2021, confirming that they accessed their user data.</p> <p>OSS revealed that they didn't implement robust security measures as cybersecurity wasn't such a critical issue back in 2006 when the website was launched. In the preceding years, they didn't improve the site's security. That's why attackers could compromise the website by hacking a SuperAdmin's low-security password and accessing user data after performing SQL injection.</p> <p><b>What Data was Compromised?</b></p> <p>The attacker downloaded the SQL dump, including usernames, passwords, and email addresses of almost 7 million users (6,783,158). However, the website admin OSS has confirmed that credit card details weren't compromised in the attack because these are stored on another platform.</p> <p>But, as per the details shared by Have I Been Pwned, the data dump also included the user's IP addresses and geographic location.</p> <p><b>About OpenSubtitles</b></p>

	<p>OpenSubtitles is a famous subtitle repository where millions of subtitle files are downloaded weekly in different languages to be paired with downloaded TV shows and movies. The website was launched by a Slovakian programmer who developed this idea while drinking beer at a local pub.</p> <p><b>Attacker Demanded Ransom</b></p> <p>The website admin stated that the attacker demanded a huge ransom from them in August for not disclosing the attack, and payment had to be made in Bitcoin. The attackers promised that they would also cooperate with OpenSubtitles to close the security flaws and delete the data dump.</p> <p>However these were fake promises because even after receiving the ransom, the attackers never contacted them. On 11 January 2022, the attackers leaked the data online.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 WordPress themes, plugins backdoored</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/over-90-wordpress-themes-plugins-backdoored-in-supply-chain-attack/">https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/over-90-wordpress-themes-plugins-backdoored-in-supply-chain-attack/</a>
GIST	<p>A massive supply chain attack compromised 93 WordPress themes and plugins to contain a backdoor, giving threat-actors full access to websites.</p> <p>In total, threat actors compromised 40 themes and 53 plugins belonging to AccessPress, a developer of WordPress add-ons used in over 360,000 active websites.</p> <p>The attack was discovered by researchers at Jetpack, the creators of a security and optimization tool for WordPress sites, who discovered that a PHP backdoor had been added to the themes and plugins.</p> <p>Jetpack believes an external threat actor breached the AccessPress website to compromise the software and infect further WordPress sites.</p> <p><b>A backdoor to give complete control</b></p> <p>As soon as admins installed a compromised AccessPress product on their site, the actors added a new “initial.php” file into the main theme directory and included it in the main “functions.php” file.</p> <p>This file contained a base64 encoded payload that writes a webshell into the “./wp-includes/vars.php” file.</p> <p>The malicious code completed the backdoor installation by decoding the payload and injecting it into the “vars.php” file, essentially giving the threat actors remote control over the infected site.</p> <p>The only way to detect this threat is to use a core file integrity monitoring solution, as the malware deletes the “initial.php” file dropper to cover its tracks.</p> <p>According to <a href="#">Sucuri</a> researchers who investigated the case to figure out the actors’ goal, threat actors used the backdoor to redirect visitors to malware-dropping and scam sites. Therefore, the campaign wasn’t very sophisticated.</p> <p>It’s also possible that the actor used this malware to sell access to backdoored websites on the dark web, which would be an effective way to monetize such a large-scale infection.</p> <p><b>Backdoors detected in September</b></p> <p>Jetpack first detected the backdoor in September 2021, and soon after, the researchers discovered that threat actors had compromised all free plugins and themes belonging to the vendor.</p> <p>Jetpack believes that the paid AccessPress add-ons were likely compromised but didn’t test those, so this cannot be confirmed.</p> <p>Most of the products had likely been compromised in early September from the timestamps.</p>

	<p>On October 15, 2021, the vendor removed the extensions from the official download portal until the point of the compromise was located and fixed.</p> <p>On January 17, 2022, AccessPress released new, “cleaned” versions for all the affected plugins.</p> <p>However, the affected themes haven’t been cleaned yet, so migrating to a different theme is the only way to mitigate the security risks.</p> <p>Users of AccessPress plugins and themes can read <a href="#">Jetpack’s post</a> for a complete list of the fixed products. BleepingComputer attempted to contact AccessPress about the compromise, but the contact form is not working.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Fake shipping delivery email installs RAT</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/phishing-impersonates-shipping-giant-maersk-to-push-strrat-malware/">https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/phishing-impersonates-shipping-giant-maersk-to-push-strrat-malware/</a>
GIST	<p>A new phishing campaign using fake shipping delivery lures installs the STRRAT remote access trojan on unsuspecting victim's devices.</p> <p>Fortinet discovered the new campaign after spotting phishing emails impersonating Maersk Shipping, a giant in the global shipping industry, and using seemingly legitimate email addresses.</p> <p>If the recipient opens the attached document, the macro code that runs fetches the <a href="#">STRRAT malware</a> onto their machine, a powerful remote access trojan that can steal information and even fake ransomware attacks.</p> <p><b>Impersonating Maersk shipping emails</b></p> <p>As seen in the header information of the phishing emails, the messages are routed through recently registered domains that increase the risk of being flagged by email security solutions.</p> <p>The email claims to be information about a shipment, changes in delivery dates, or notices regarding a fictitious purchase and includes an Excel attachment or links to one that pretends to be the related invoice.</p> <p>In some cases, Fortinet's analysts sampled emails that carried ZIP files that contained the STRRAT malware, so no intermediate dropper in the form of a document was used.</p> <p>The actors have obfuscated the contained packages by using the Allatori tool to evade detection from security products.</p> <p>The STRRAT infection begins by decrypting the configuration file, copying the malware into a new directory, and adding new Windows registry entries for persistence.</p> <p><b>The STRRAT threat</b></p> <p>STRRAT malware first gathers basic information on the host system like the architecture and any anti-virus tools running on it and checks local storage and network capability.</p> <p>In terms of its functionality, STRRAT can perform the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Log user keystrokes</li> <li>• Facilitate remote control operation</li> <li>• Grab passwords from web browsers like Chrome, Firefox, and Microsoft Edge</li> <li>• Steal passwords from email clients like Outlook, Thunderbird, and Foxmail</li> <li>• Run a pseudo-ransomware module to simulate an infection</li> </ul>

	<p>This last part is interesting because no files are encrypted in the fake ransomware attack. As such, it's most likely used to divert the victim's attention away from the real problem, which is the exfiltration of data.</p> <p>However, considering that this module essentially blows the cover of STRRAT, its presence and deployment is somewhat contradictory.</p> <p>Finally, the malware's communication method isn't very well optimized for stealthiness either.</p> <p>"Examining that traffic in Wireshark shows STRRAT being exceptionally noisy. This is likely due to the C2 channel being offline at the time of the investigation," explains <a href="#">Fortinet's report</a></p> <p>"In its effort to obtain further instructions, the sample attempts to communicate over port 1780 and 1788 at one-second intervals, if not more in some instances."</p> <p>Trojans like STRRAT often go ignored for being less sophisticated and more randomly deployed. However, this phishing campaign demonstrates that lesser threats in circulation can still deliver damaging blows to companies.</p> <p>The phishing emails used in this campaign blend very homogeneously with day-to-day corporate communications in companies that deal with shipments and transportation, so it only takes a tired or careless employee for the damage to be done.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 FBI: malicious QR codes steal money</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/fbi-warns-of-malicious-qr-codes-used-to-steal-your-money/">https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/fbi-warns-of-malicious-qr-codes-used-to-steal-your-money/</a>
GIST	<p>The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) warned Americans this week that cybercriminals are using maliciously crafted Quick Response (QR) codes to steal their credentials and financial info.</p> <p>The warning was issued as a public service announcement (PSA) published on the Bureau's Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) earlier this week.</p> <p>"Cybercriminals are tampering with QR codes to redirect victims to malicious sites that steal login and financial information," the federal law enforcement agency said.</p> <p>The FBI said crooks are switching legitimate QR codes used by businesses for payment purposes to redirect potential victims to malicious websites designed to steal their personal and financial information, install malware on their devices, or divert their payments to accounts under their control.</p> <p>After the victims scan what looks like legitimate codes, they get sent to attackers' phishing sites, where they are prompted to enter their login and financial info. Once entered, it gets sent to the cybercriminals who can use it to steal money using hijacked banking accounts.</p> <p>"While QR codes are not malicious in nature, it is important to practice caution when entering financial information as well as providing payment through a site navigated to through a QR code," the FBI <a href="#">added</a>. "Law enforcement cannot guarantee the recovery of lost funds after transfer."</p> <p><b>Pay attention when scanning QR codes</b></p> <p>The FBI advised Americans to pay attention to the URL they're sent after scanning QR codes, always be cautious when entering their data after scanning a QR code, and make sure that physical QR codes haven't been covered with malicious ones.</p> <p>You should also avoid installing apps via QR codes or installing QR code scanners (instead, use the one that comes with your phone's OS).</p> <p>Last but not least, always enter URLs by hand when making payments instead of scanning a QR code that could be set up to redirect you to malicious sites.</p>

	<p>The FBI issued another PSA focused on QR code risks in November, alerting people that victims of various fraud schemes are <a href="#">increasingly asked by criminals to use QR codes and cryptocurrency ATMs</a> to hinder efforts to recover their financial losses.</p> <p>As evidenced by a <a href="#">recent phishing campaign targeting German e-banking users</a>, threat actors use QR codes instead of buttons in spam emails to make their attacks harder to detect by security software and successfully redirect victims to phishing sites.</p> <p>Victims successfully redirected to the phishing landing pages were asked to enter their bank location, code, user names, and PINs.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Fraud on rise, going to get worse</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.darkreading.com/edge-articles/fraud-is-on-the-rise-and-its-going-to-get-worse">https://www.darkreading.com/edge-articles/fraud-is-on-the-rise-and-its-going-to-get-worse</a>
GIST	<p>As more daily activities — work, education, shopping, and entertainment — shift online, fraud is also on the rise. A trio of recent reports paint a bleak picture, highlighting concerns that companies are experiencing increasing losses from fraud and that the situation will get worse over the coming year.</p> <p>In <a href="#">KPMG's survey of senior risk executives</a>, 67% say their companies have experienced external fraud in the past 12 months, and 38% expect the risk of fraud committed by external perpetrators to somewhat increase in the next year.</p> <p>External fraud, which includes credit card fraud and identity theft, is specifically referring to incidents perpetrated by individuals outside the company. For most of these respondents, there was a financial impact: Forty-two percent say their organizations experienced 0.5% to 1% of loss as a result of fraud and cybercrime.</p> <p>On a macro level, merchant losses to online payment fraud will exceed \$206 billion cumulatively for the period between 2021 and 20255, according to Juniper Research.</p> <p>Social-engineering tactics such as phishing messages, fake social media profiles, and fake mobile applications are effective for a quick cash-out, says fraud and risk intelligence company Outseer (spun out of RSA Security in June) in its fourth quarter "<a href="#">Fraud and Payments Report</a>." Malware such as Trojans are being utilized less often because they require more resources to operate and monetize, Outseer says.</p> <p>More consumers taking a "digital-first approach to everything from shopping, dating, and investing" makes fraud even more attractive to criminals, Experian notes in its annual "<a href="#">Future of Fraud Forecast</a>." One area that fraud is growing is in the buy now, pay later (BNPL) space — where customers make a purchase and receive it immediately but pay for it at a later time, usually over a series of installments.</p> <p>Layaway plans aren't new, but with the surge in online shopping, more retailers have started offering this feature, and more financial services organizations have added this service to their portfolio. <a href="#">Experian cites figures</a> estimating 45 million active BNPL users spending more than \$20.8 billion. PayPal's BNPL service reported a 400% year-over-year increase in usage on Black Friday and processed more than \$1 billion in transactions in November, Outseer says in its report.</p> <p>BNPL lenders will see an uptick in two types of fraud: identity theft, where criminals are using stolen login credentials to access BNPL accounts and make purchases, and synthetic identity fraud, where criminals combine real and fake information to create an entirely new identity to create new BNPL accounts. The synthetic fraud is taking advantage of the fact that BNPL lenders frequently have less stringent identity verification rules to create new accounts, which are then used to defraud merchants.</p> <p>"As the industry enters 2022, anti-fraud solutions that employ machine learning, data science, and shared global intelligence could be crucial for identifying and stemming BNPL fraud," Outseer says.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/21 REvil gang arrests trigger uncertainty
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.darkreading.com/threat-intelligence/revil-arrests-trigger-uncertainty-concern-in-cybercrime-forums">https://www.darkreading.com/threat-intelligence/revil-arrests-trigger-uncertainty-concern-in-cybercrime-forums</a>
GIST	<p>Law enforcement action typically does little to deter cybercriminal activity. But last week's arrests in Russia of several members of the notorious REvil ransomware group, as well as the dismantling of its criminal infrastructure, appear to have finally grabbed the attention of at least some threat actors.</p> <p>Researchers from Trustwave who regularly track chatter on underground forums this week observed signs of considerable anxiety and consternation among Eastern-European cybercriminals in the days following the REvil arrests. Many threat actors apparently seem less confident about Russia being a haven for their operations and fear that cooperation between Russian and US authorities could pose major problems for them in the future.</p> <p>"We've observed that threat actors [have been] shaken out of previously feeling invulnerable to now feeling some instability, fear, and paranoia," says Karl Sigler, senior security research manager at Trustwave SpiderLabs. How long that sentiment will prevail depends entirely on how punitive the follow-up legal actions will be against those who have been arrested, he says.</p> <p>Last Friday, Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) announced it had <a href="#">arrested 14 members</a> of the REvil gang and raided 25 locations associated with the individuals, in actions aimed at disrupting REvil's prodigious ransomware operations. The raids resulted in the FSB seizing the equivalent of \$6.8 million in various currencies, as well as 20 luxury vehicles, cryptocurrency wallets, and computer equipment that gang members used as part of REvil operations.</p> <p>Many security experts viewed the arrests with some skepticism because of its timing right in the middle of tense talks between the US and Russia over a potential invasion of Ukraine by the latter. The skeptics viewed the FSB's move as calculated to curry favor with the US, which had expressed deep concern over the threat posed by REvil following damaging ransomware attacks on <a href="#">JBS Foods</a> and <a href="#">Kaseya</a> last May and June by groups using the malware.</p> <p>Despite the suspect motives, the FSB's action was significant and marked the first time that Russian authorities had acted against a major cyberthreat group operating from within its borders — and also at the behest of the US. In the past Russia had refused to even acknowledge that threat actors might be operating freely within the country because they perceived it to be a safe harbor for them.</p> <p><a href="#">Trustwave found</a> that the FSB's surprise arrests last week have shaken that sense of complacency considerably. The security vendor observed threat actors on underground forums expressing concern over being arrested and Russia no longer being a safe place for their operations. Some even have begun discussing the potential of moving operations to India, the Middle East, China, and even Israel.</p> <p>"In fact, one thing is clear, those who expect that the state would protect them will be greatly disappointed," Trustwave quoted one forum member as saying.</p> <p><b>Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt</b></p> <p>Trustwave found that the arrests have also fueled some paranoia within the Eastern European cybercrime community about a potential mole within their ranks. Apparently, there is some concern about one forum administrator working secretly with law enforcement. Suspicions about the individual's double role prompted one forum member to announce plans to publish part of his personal correspondence with the administrator, presumably to link the individual to the forum's illegal activities.</p> <p>Others have begun offering advice on how to mitigate exposure to law enforcement by taking advantage of mechanisms like Tor, deleting old messages, using encryption, and not keeping all stolen data and other artifacts on a single computer. Trustwave observed one forum member saying: "It is now dangerous to write anything at all, anywhere. All posts need to be cleaned, those who are connected with cybercrime."</p>



	<p>One of the tips that cybercriminals are offering each other is to avoid attracting attention like REvil did with its attacks on major, multibillion US organizations and targets in critical infrastructure sectors, such as JBS Foods. Trustwave observed several forum members suggesting that REvil's downfall resulted from its much-publicized boasting and intemperate targeting of organizations located in countries that had the muscle to pressure the Russian government to act.</p> <p>Sigler says the volume of chatter on the underground forums is higher than it has observed before.</p> <p>"The level of fear of being arrested and the discussion around the possibility that their homeland is no longer a safe haven are unique," he says. "There is serious concern that cooperation between the United States and Russia will be a problem for their operations going forward."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Exposed records exceed 40B in 2021</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.helpnetsecurity.com/2022/01/21/exposed-records-2021/?web_view=true">https://www.helpnetsecurity.com/2022/01/21/exposed-records-2021/?web_view=true</a>
GIST	<p>According to a research by Tenable, at least 40,417,167,937 records were exposed worldwide in 2021, calculated by the analysis of 1,825 <a href="#">breach data incidents</a> publicly disclosed between November 2020 and October 2021. This is a considerable increase on the same period in 2020, which saw 730 publicly disclosed events with just over 22 billion records exposed.</p> <p>By understanding threat actor behavior, organizations can effectively prioritize security efforts to disrupt attack paths and protect critical systems and assets. Analysis of the events for this report found that many are readily mitigated by patching legacy vulnerabilities and <a href="#">addressing misconfigurations</a> to help limit attack paths.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ransomware had a monumental impact on organizations in 2021, responsible for approximately 38% of all breaches.</li> <li>• 6% of breaches were the result of unsecured cloud databases.</li> <li>• Unpatched SSL VPNs continue to provide an ideal entry point for attackers to perform cyberespionage, exfiltrate sensitive and proprietary information as well as encrypt networks.</li> <li>• Threat groups, particularly ransomware, have increasingly exploited vulnerabilities and misconfigurations in Active Directory.</li> <li>• Software libraries and network stacks used commonly amongst OT devices often introduce additional risk when security controls and code audits are not in place.</li> <li>• Ransomware groups favored physical <a href="#">supply chain</a> disruption as a tactic to extort payment while cyberespionage campaigns exploited the software supply chain to access sensitive data.</li> <li>• Healthcare and education experienced the greatest disruption from data breaches.</li> </ul> <p>"Migration to cloud platforms, reliance on managed service providers, software and infrastructure as a service have all changed how organizations must think about and secure the perimeter," explains <a href="#">Claire Tills</a>, Senior Research Engineer, <a href="#">Tenable</a>.</p> <p>"Modern security leaders and practitioners must think more holistically about the attack paths that exist within their networks and how they can efficiently disrupt them. By examining threat actor behavior we can understand which attack paths are the most fruitful and leverage these insights to define an effective security strategy. "</p> <p>Staying on top of patching assets is difficult enough given the sheer volume of disclosed vulnerabilities, but in 2021 it was even more challenging due to incomplete patches, miscommunications from vendors and patch bypasses.</p> <p>In 2021, there were 21,957 common vulnerabilities and exposures (CVEs) reported, representing a 19.6% increase over the 18,358 reported in 2020 and a 241% increase over the 6,447 disclosed in 2016. From 2016 to 2021 the number of CVEs increased at an average annual percentage growth rate of 28.3%.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/21 Stealthy firmware bootkit: MoonBounce
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.helpnetsecurity.com/2022/01/21/firmware-bootkit/?web_view=true">https://www.helpnetsecurity.com/2022/01/21/firmware-bootkit/?web_view=true</a>
GIST	<p>Kaspersky researchers have uncovered the third known case of a firmware bootkit in the wild. Dubbed MoonBounce, this malicious implant is hidden within Unified Extensible Firmware Interface (UEFI) firmware, an essential part of computers, in the SPI flash, a storage component external to the hard drive.</p> <p>Such implants are notoriously difficult to remove and are of limited visibility to security products. Having first appeared in the wild in the spring of 2021, MoonBounce demonstrates a sophisticated attack flow, with evident advancement in comparison to formerly reported UEFI firmware bootkits. The researchers attributed the campaign, with considerable confidence, to the well-known advanced persistent threat (APT) actor APT41.</p> <p><b>Bootkit hidden in the UEFI firmware</b></p> <p>UEFI firmware is a critical component in the vast majority of machines; its code is responsible for booting up the device and passing control to the software that loads the operating system. This code rests in what's called SPI flash, a non-volatile storage external to the hard disk. If this firmware contains malicious code, then this code will be launched before the operating system, making malware implanted by a firmware bootkit especially difficult to delete.</p> <p>It can't be removed simply by reformatting a hard drive or reinstalling an OS. What's more, because the code is located outside of the hard drive, such bootkits' activity goes virtually undetected by most security solutions unless they have a feature that specifically scans this part of the device.</p> <p>MoonBounce is only the third reported UEFI bootkit found in the wild. It appeared in the spring of 2021 and was first discovered by Kaspersky researchers when they were looking at the activity of their Firmware Scanner, which has been included in Kaspersky products since the beginning of 2019 to specifically detect threats hiding in the ROM BIOS, including UEFI firmware images. When compared to the two previously discovered bootkits, <a href="#">LoJax</a> and <a href="#">MosaicRegressor</a>, MoonBounce demonstrates significant advancement with a more complicated attack flow and greater technical sophistication.</p> <p>The implant rests in the CORE_DXE component of the firmware, which is called upon early during the UEFI boot sequence. Then, through a series of hooks that intercept certain functions, the implant's components make their way into the operating system, where they reach out to a command &amp; control server in order to retrieve further malicious payloads, which Kaspersky researchers were unable to retrieve. The infection chain itself does not leave any traces on the hard drive, since its components operate in memory only, thus facilitating a fileless attack with a small footprint.</p> <p>While investigating MoonBounce, Kaspersky researchers uncovered several malicious loaders and post-exploitation malware across several nodes of the same network. This includes ScrambleCross, or Sidewalk, an in-memory implant that can communicate to a C2 server to exchange information and execute additional plugins, Mimikat_ssp, a publicly available post-exploitation tool used to dump credentials and security secrets, a formerly unknown Golang-based backdoor, and Microcin, malware that is typically used by the SixLittleMonkeys threat actor.</p> <p>The exact infection vector remains unknown, however, it is assumed that the infection occurs through remote access to the targeted machine. In addition, while LoJax and MosaicRegressor utilized additions of DXE drivers, MoonBounce modifies an existing firmware component for a stealthier and more subtle attack.</p> <p><b>Malware attribution</b></p> <p>In the overall campaign against the network in question, it was evident that the attackers carried out a wide range of actions, such as archiving files and gathering network information. Commands used by attackers throughout their activity suggest they were interested in lateral movement and exfiltration of data, and, given that a UEFI implant was used, it is likely the attackers were interested in conducting ongoing espionage activity.</p>

Kaspersky has attributed MoonBounce with considerable confidence to APT41, which has been widely reported to be a Chinese-speaking threat actor that's conducted cyberespionage and cybercrime campaigns around the world since at least 2012. In addition, the existence of some of the aforementioned malware in the same network suggests a possible connection between APT41 and other Chinese-speaking threat actors.

So far, the firmware bootkit has only been found in a single case. However, other affiliated malicious samples (e.g. ScrambleCross and its loaders) have been found on the networks of several other victims.

"While we can't definitely connect the additional malware implants found during our research to MoonBounce specifically, it does appear as if some Chinese-speaking threat actors are sharing tools with one another to aid in their various campaigns; there especially seems to be a low confidence connection between MoonBounce and Microcin," said Denis Legezo, senior security researcher with GReAT.

"Perhaps more importantly, this latest UEFI bootkit shows same notable advancements when compared to MosaicRegressor, which we reported on back in 2020," said Mark Lechtik, senior security researcher with the Global Research and Analysis Team (GReAT) at Kaspersky.

"In fact, transforming a previously benign core component in firmware to one that can facilitate malware deployment on the system is an innovation that was not seen in previous comparable firmware bootkits in the wild and makes the threat far stealthier. We predicted back in 2018 that UEFI threats would gain in popularity, and this trend does appear to be materializing. We would not be surprised to find additional bootkits in 2022. Fortunately, vendors have begun paying more attention to firmware attacks, and more firmware security technologies, such as BootGuard and Trusted Platform Modules, are gradually being adopted."

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HEADLINE	01/21 Spyware blitzes target ICS networks
SOURCE	<a href="https://threatpost.com/spyware-blitzes-compromise-cannibalize-ics-networks/177851/?web_view=true">https://threatpost.com/spyware-blitzes-compromise-cannibalize-ics-networks/177851/?web_view=true</a>
GIST	<p>Attackers are targeting industrial enterprises with <a href="#">spyware campaigns</a> that hunt for corporate credentials so they can be used both for financial gain and to cannibalize compromised networks to propagate future attacks, researchers have found.</p> <p>The campaigns use off-the-shelf spyware but are unique in that they limit the scope and lifetime of each sample to the bare minimum, according to researchers at Kaspersky ICS CERT who uncovered the campaigns.</p> <p>Researchers dubbed the attacks "anomalous" because they veer from typical spyware attacks, Kaspersky's Kirill Kruglov wrote <a href="#">in a report</a> published this week on the SecureList blog. Attackers use spearphishing emails sent from compromised corporate mailboxes that include malicious attachments that deliver spyware, he explained.</p> <p>The attackers use SMTP services of industrial enterprises not only to send spearphishing emails but also to collect data stolen by spyware as a one-way command-and-control (C2) so they can mount future attacks, Kruglov explained.</p> <p>"We believe that initially stolen data is used by threat operators primarily to spread the attack inside the local network of the attacked organization (via phishing emails) and to attack other organizations in order to collect more credentials," he wrote. "The attackers use corporate mailboxes compromised in earlier attacks as the C2 servers for new attacks."</p> <p>The malware used in the attacks typically belong to "well-known commodity spyware families," such as AgentTesla/Origin Logger, HawkEye, Noon/Formbook, Masslogger, Snake Keylogger, Azorult and Lokibot, he noted.</p>

However, “these attacks stand out from the mainstream due to a very limited number of targets in each attack and a very short lifetime of each malicious sample,” Kruglov wrote.

### **Targeting ICS Enterprises**

About 45 percent of targeted computers in the campaigns appear to be industrial control system (ICS)-related and have access to the corporate email service of their respective company, researchers said.

Kaspersky researchers have identified more than 2,000 corporate email accounts belonging to industrial companies that have been stolen and abused as next-attack C2 in the campaigns. However, they estimate that more than 7,000 have actually been stolen, sold on the internet or “abused in other ways,” Kruglov wrote.

“Amongst attacks of this kind, we’ve noticed a large set of campaigns that spread from one industrial enterprise to another via hard-to-detect phishing emails disguised as the victim organizations’ correspondence and abusing their corporate email systems to attack through the contact lists of compromised mailboxes,” he explained.

### **Independent, Low-Skilled Perpetrators**

Researchers believe the actors behind the analogous campaigns are “low-skilled individuals and small groups” operating independently, they said. Their aim is either to commit financial crimes using stolen credentials or to make money by selling access to corporate network servers and services.

Indeed, they identified more than 25 different marketplaces where threat actors are selling the data stolen in the campaigns against industrial enterprises.

“At these markets, various sellers offer thousands of RDP, SMTP, SSH, cPanel, and email accounts, as well as malware, fraud schemes, and samples of emails and webpages for social engineering,” Kruglov explained.

More dangerous threat actors like Advanced Persistent Threat (APT) and ransomware groups also can use the credentials to mount attacks, he added.

To avoid compromise by the campaigns, Kaspersky recommends implementing two-factor authentication for corporate email access and other internet-facing services such as RDP and VPN-SSL gateways.

Researchers also advise that organizations shore up endpoint security, train personnel to securely approach all incoming email, regularly check spam folders instead of just emptying them and monitor the exposure of the organization’s accounts to the web, among other protections.

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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Most Yemen faces 3<sup>rd</sup> day without internet</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/yemenis-struggle-without-internet-third-day-after-air-strikes-2022-01-23/">https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/yemenis-struggle-without-internet-third-day-after-air-strikes-2022-01-23/</a>
GIST	<p>SANAA, Jan 23 (Reuters) - Most of Yemen faced a third day without internet on Sunday after air strikes on the Red Sea city of Hodeidah, the main landing point for the country's undersea web connection, damaged its telecoms infrastructure.</p> <p>In the capital Sanaa, Majid Abdullah said he was unable to receive money from relatives in Saudi Arabia at an exchange office as a result of the ongoing outage. <a href="#">read more</a></p> <p>Seven years of conflict have divided Yemen between an internationally-recognised government based in the southern city of Aden, and the Iran-aligned Houthis in Sanaa.</p> <p>"I don't know what to do. We eat and drink from the (money sent by) expatriates abroad," he said.</p>

	<p>The war in Yemen has killed tens of thousands of people and displaced millions, while economic collapse has pushed millions into poverty and parts of the country to the brink of famine.</p> <p>The government's communications ministry said on Sunday that it was ready to re-connect territory under its control via another undersea cable which lands in Aden, where parts of the city still have internet services. Some organisations have access to satellite internet.</p> <p>Muammar Abdullah, a Yemeni living in Saudi Arabia, said he was not able to make daily checks on his family in Sanaa, which have become important after an increase in coalition air strikes, as a result of the internet being down and must instead make costly international calls. <a href="#">read more</a></p> <p>And cut off from her internet chats with friends and family, university student Maha Muhammad in Sanaa has turned to the TV.</p> <p>"We went back to watching television to follow the news. I used to rely on websites and social networking sites for the latest war developments," she said.</p> <p>It remains unclear when repairs in Hodeidah will be carried out, or what needs to be done.</p> <p>"If safety is guaranteed, and we get guarantees that the strikes are not resumed, our engineers are ready to do the repairs," Ali Nagi, CEO of the TeleYemen telecoms company Nosary, told Reuters from Sanaa.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 Bitcoin prices fall sharply amid selloff</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/01/22/crypto-crash-bitcoin-fed/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/01/22/crypto-crash-bitcoin-fed/</a>
GIST	<p>A dramatic sell-off in bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies has outpaced a <a href="#">marked retreat</a> in the U.S. stock market, as the Federal Reserve's pivot from emergency support spooks investors who piled into highflying but risky assets during the pandemic.</p> <p>The price of bitcoin has fallen from its November highs of nearly \$70,000 to now around \$35,000. On Saturday, bitcoin, the world's largest cryptocurrency by market value, had fallen around 9 percent in just 24 hours. Since the start of the year, it has fallen around 23 percent. Meanwhile, Ethereum, the second largest cryptocurrency, fared even worse, dropping around 15 percent over 24 hours and roughly 35 percent since the new year.</p> <p>The sell-off accelerated a two-month slide in the global cryptocurrency market that has vaporized \$1.4 trillion in value: After reaching a high of roughly \$3 trillion in early November, the total value of digital assets sat just above \$1.6 trillion early Saturday afternoon, according to CoinMarketCap.</p> <p>Vocal supporters of bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies suggest they have the potential to transform finance and are <a href="#">pushing</a> for crypto to edge further into mainstream use as a store of value or a payment alternative. But many people are buying — and, increasingly selling — crypto as a speculative bet in hopes of turning a quick profit.</p> <p>The latest crash is demonstrating the perils of the approach, just as millions of Americans have joined the digital gold rush in recent months.</p> <p>Backers of bitcoin in particular argue its value lies in its limited supply — the network behind it will only mint 21 million of the tokens — suggesting it should serve as a safe place to park money during times of high inflation. But prices are rising across the economy at their <a href="#">fastest clip in 40 years</a>, putting the thesis under strain. To combat this, the Fed is preparing to raise interest rates, leading many investors to pull back.</p> <p>The stock market sell-off has been pronounced and attracted the most attention in recent days. The Dow Jones industrial average fell 3.9 percent for the week, while the broad-based S&amp;P 500 shed 5.1 percent since Tuesday. The tech-heavy Nasdaq composite index fell 6.2 percent this week. But instead of investors</p>

pulling money out of the stock market and piling it into bitcoin, the pullback from crypto has been even faster.

“You’d think with the inflation we’re seeing, you’d see the opposite,” said Bob Fitzsimmons, the executive vice president for fixed income, commodities and stock lending at Wedbush Securities. “That’s been one of the selling points for bitcoin, so its correlation to stock prices has surprised me.”

Matt Maley, chief market strategist for Miller Tabak + Co., said bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies got swept up in a frenzy of investor optimism as the Fed deployed its vast emergency intervention to prop up a pandemic-ravaged economy in 2020.

“It’s human nature to think, ‘I’m making money, therefore I’m really smart and this thing will keep going up,’ ” he said. “They were right, but not as right as they thought they were.”

He said he still believes bitcoin will prove itself as a sort of next-generation gold, but it will take time for investors to gain confidence in its safety.

The wild, at times precipitous, swings in the assets’ values have increasingly caught Washington’s attention, intensifying questions over how the emerging technology should be regulated. The attention from regulators and lawmakers has spurred the industry to assemble an army of lobbyists to fend off tougher scrutiny, even as it’s unclear what regulation would even begin to look like.

The most recent price plunge comes as the Federal Reserve is [taking its own steps](#), weighing whether to launch a U.S. digital currency, akin to electronic cash that would be backed by the central bank. On Thursday, the Fed released a long-awaited report exploring its options. For months, crypto experts, economists and lawmakers alike have been eager for any insight into the Fed’s closely held thinking.

The report reached no conclusive answers, instead wading into the pros and cons of any decision. That’s in keeping with the Fed’s slow movement on issues around digital currencies, even as other central banks experiment with their own versions. The Fed has made clear that, rather than race to beat its competitors, it will be patient and deliberate, and Fed officials routinely caution that any action would ultimately depend on approval from lawmakers in Congress.

The crypto crash came as the stock market saw its [worst week since the start of the coronavirus pandemic](#). Just about every sector of the stock market sold off, with technology companies like Apple and Netflix taking massive blows. The drop offered a sobering reckoning for investors after the markets [closed out 2021](#) in joyful fashion, despite the fact that so many other parts of the economy remain compromised by the ongoing pandemic, soaring inflation and instability in the job market.

Even so, popular interest in cryptocurrency has exploded in recent years. Nearly 30,000 bitcoin ATMs have popped up nationally in the last few years, and even major sports stadiums are now being renamed for cryptocurrency exchanges. Just [this week](#), New York City’s new mayor, Eric Adams, announced that he would convert his first paycheck into two cryptocurrencies. Adams’s office said the paycheck will be deposited with Coinbase, an online platform used for buying cryptocurrency, and then converted into Ethereum and bitcoin.

But even crypto’s most enthusiastic supporters are up against the [day-to-day reality](#) that the digital systems only go so far. Users would be hard-pressed to rely on bitcoin to pay for a meal at a restaurant, a movie ticket or a quick run to the convenience store.

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HEADLINE	01/21 DOH website for free at-home Covid tests
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.q13fox.com/news/washington-launches-website-for-free-at-home-covid-19-tests">https://www.q13fox.com/news/washington-launches-website-for-free-at-home-covid-19-tests</a>
GIST	WASHINGTON - The Washington state website to order free at-home COVID-19 tests is now live.

The Washington State Department of Health launched the website on Friday morning and residents can now order their tests, which will be shipped directly to their households.

People can order their tests at [www.sayyescovidhometest.org](http://www.sayyescovidhometest.org).

This announcement comes on the week that the federal government launched its own test-ordering tool for households across the country.

Each household [will be able to order one testing kit](#), which includes four to five tests, and the kits are expected to arrive within one to two weeks, said Lacy Fehrenbach, the state's deputy secretary for COVID-19 response.

"We anticipate people's initial need in the test kits will exceed our current supply pretty quickly, but our focus is sharing what we have right now," said Lacy Fehrenbach, MPH, CPH, Deputy Secretary for Prevention & Health. "We want to make sure the tests we have are in homes when our state needs testing the most – during this current surge."

The state predicts serving 350,000 households in Washington in the first week though more tests will be available over the next several weeks.

The state partnered with Amazon and CareEvolution to create the website, health officials had said in early January.

Those with limited internet access or who need a translator will be able to order at-home testing kits [through the state's COVID-19 hotline](#) (1-800-525-0127).

"This is an important step toward making tests more widely available across the state," said Umair A. Shah, MD, MPH, Secretary of Health. "As we work with our federal partners, we look forward to seeing an increase in the number of tests flowing directly into people's homes over the next several weeks."

Over the holiday weekend, more than a million tests were shipped to community groups and schools and as of Wednesday, 5 million more N95, KN95 and surgical masks had landed in the state, Shah said. Roughly 5 million more masks are also on the way.

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## Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	01/22 Nigeria: extremists abduct 17 girls
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/witnesses-extremists-abduct-17-girls-northeast-nigeria-82416472">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/witnesses-extremists-abduct-17-girls-northeast-nigeria-82416472</a>
GIST	<p>ABUJA, Nigeria -- Islamic extremists have abducted 17 girls in northeast Nigeria, witnesses said Saturday as the West African nation's military said it "remains resolute in decisively countering the terrorists."</p> <p>Members of the Boko Haram jihadi group attacked Pemi, a village in the Chibok local government area of Borno state, on Thursday, two residents told The Associated Press. The state is where Boko Haram's decade-long insurgency against the Nigeria government has been concentrated.</p> <p>In a statement late Friday, the Islamic State group also claimed responsibility for killing "many Christians" and setting fire to two churches and several houses during an attack on the Borno town of Bimi.</p> <p>Authorities blame Boko Haram for the killing of tens of thousands of people in Nigeria and neighboring countries in West Africa.</p>



The abduction of the girls from Pemi recalled the 2014 kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok, a remote town situated 130 kilometers (80 miles) south of Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state. More than 100 of the abducted students remain missing.

The militants targeted a church and Christians when they stormed Pemi on Thursday, according to local leader Hassan Chibok.

“They were shooting sporadically after they rounded the community,” Chibok said. “Some could not have access to escape, so they abducted 17 girls.” Eight of the girls came from one household, he said.

Nigeria's military and government authorities did not immediately respond the AP's request for comment on the abductions.

Another resident, Yana Galang, said the extremists razed a church building and targeted nearby houses.

“Some of them (the abducted girls) are 10, 11, 12 years,” Galang said. “They just parked their vehicle near the compounds. You know, as children, they just carried them and put them in the vehicle.”

A Nigerian army spokesperson, Onyema Nwachukwu, told AP on Friday that the insurgents were “desperate” to grow their influence. He was commenting on a video from a Boko Haram offshoot which purported to show child soldiers executing Nigerian army personnel.

“Having been depleted by our troops, the imbroglio in their ranks and the massive surrendering of Boko Haram, the terrorists, in a desperate move, are embarking on a recruitment drive to shore up their strength with child soldiers, who they could easily indoctrinate, manipulate and cheaply manage financially,” Nwachukwu said.

The Islamic extremist rebels in northeast Nigeria — comprising Boko Haram and its breakaway faction, the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) — remain “very, very dangerous”, United Nations humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths said this week.

The insurgency and its resultant humanitarian crisis, Griffiths told the AP, is “very difficult to deter (and) a grave and clear and present danger.”

Security analysts have told AP one of the challenges the Nigerian military usually faces in rooting out the rebels is their use of women and children as cover during airstrikes.

“They have also conscripted children, minors, who they engage as child soldiers and women, whom they use as sex slaves,” army spokesperson Nwachukwu said.

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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Youngest person in UK convicted of terror</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-tees-60056108">https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-tees-60056108</a>
GIST	<p><b>A schoolboy has become the youngest person in the UK to be convicted of terror offences.</b></p> <p>At Westminster Magistrates' Court, the 14-year-old, who cannot be named, admitted three counts of possessing information useful to a terrorist.</p> <p>The boy, from Darlington, was arrested in July last year when he was 13 as part of an investigation into extreme right-wing terrorism.</p> <p>He was bailed and will be sentenced on 1 April at Newton Aycliffe Youth Court.</p> <p>The teenager, who had been active on racist online forums, was charged last week with possessing information useful to a terrorist - namely manuals for making explosives - with the offences relating to a period on or before July 2021, when he was 13 or younger.</p>



	<p>The investigation was carried out by Counter Terrorism Policing North East.</p> <p>Until now <a href="#"><u>the youngest British terror offender was a neo-Nazi from Cornwall</u></a> who downloaded one of several terrorist manuals when he was 13 but he was two years older when he was arrested.</p> <p>The youngest person convicted of <a href="#"><u>planning a terrorist attack in the UK was a 16-year-old boy</u></a>, also from County Durham.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 EU re-establishes Afghan presence</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/european-union-re-establishes-physical-presence-afghanistan-spokesman-2022-01-21/">https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/european-union-re-establishes-physical-presence-afghanistan-spokesman-2022-01-21/</a>
GIST	<p>KABUL/BERLIN, Jan 21 (Reuters) - The European Union said on Friday it was re-establishing a physical presence in Afghanistan for humanitarian purposes, but stressed it was not formally recognising the Taliban-led administration.</p> <p>It was the first such announcement by a Western power since the 27-nation EU and many governments withdrew staff and diplomats from Afghanistan as Kabul fell to the hardline Islamist Taliban last August.</p> <p>"The EU has started to re-establish a minimal presence of international EU Delegation staff to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid and monitor the humanitarian situation," said European Commission foreign affairs spokesman Peter Stano.</p> <p>A Taliban foreign ministry spokesman had earlier said in a Tweet that its officials had reached an understanding with the EU, which had "officially opened its embassy with a permanent presence in Kabul &amp; practically commenced operations".</p> <p>The EU spokesperson stopped short of saying the mission had been formally re-opened.</p> <p>"Our minimal presence in Kabul must not in any way be seen as recognition. This has also been clearly communicated to the de facto authorities," he said.</p> <p>Also on Friday, the Norwegian foreign ministry said it had invited Taliban representatives to Oslo on Jan. 23 for talks with representatives of the international community and Afghan civil society members.</p> <p>Governments globally have been grappling with how to avoid formally recognising the Taliban, which swept to power on Aug. 15 as foreign forces withdrew, while working to stem a growing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.</p> <p>Many countries have ramped up humanitarian aid - aimed at urgent needs and largely bypassing government channels - as most development aid to the country has been cut off and strict restrictions placed on the banking sector due to sanctions against members of the militant group.</p> <p>The EU on Tuesday announced it was launching projects worth 268.3 million euros (\$304.06 million), mostly to be channelled through United Nations agencies focused on health, education and displaced people.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Vienna attacker accomplices used crypto?</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/exclusive-islamist-attackers-suspected-accomplices-used-crypto-exchange-binance-2022-01-21/">https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/exclusive-islamist-attackers-suspected-accomplices-used-crypto-exchange-binance-2022-01-21/</a>
GIST	<p>LONDON, Jan 21 (Reuters) - Two men suspected by Germany of assisting an Islamist gunman, who killed four people in Vienna in 2020, used the major cryptocurrency exchange Binance, German federal police said in a confidential letter seeking information from the company.</p>

Germany's Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) said in the March 2021 letter, which was seen by Reuters, there were indications that the suspects bought or sold an unspecified amount of cryptocurrency on Binance.

Prosecutors have identified the men as Drilon G., a German national, and Blinor S. of Kosovo. Reuters is also withholding their full names.

Blinor S. used a bank account to carry out "several" transactions with Binance, the BKA wrote. A Binance verification code from February was found on Drilon G.'s phone, it added.

The BKA did not give details of the dates, number, or value of the transactions. It asked Binance to provide data relating to the pair, including all digital currency transactions. The request, it said, was in connection with "potential terrorist attack plans," without providing further detail.

Reuters couldn't determine how Binance, the world's biggest cryptocurrency exchange by trading volumes, responded to the letter.

Binance didn't comment. The BKA declined to comment.

Blinor S. and Drilon G., in messages exchanged with Reuters, denied assisting the gunman, Kujtim Fejzulai, and using cryptocurrencies to finance his or any other attack. Blinor S. said he opened a Binance account in February and used it solely to invest in different cryptocurrencies. "I know that every transaction on Binance is traceable," he said.

Lawyers for both men said neither had been formally charged with any crime and no arrest warrants have been issued.

Since last year Binance has come under pressure from financial regulators across the world. Regulators in Europe, the United States and Asia have called for tighter compliance controls on crypto exchanges to prevent money laundering and other illicit uses of digital currencies.

## VIENNA ATTACK

On Nov. 2, 2020, Fejzulai, a 20-year-old Austrian who also held North Macedonian nationality, was killed by police minutes after he opened fire on crowded bars in Vienna.

Armed with an automatic rifle, a handgun and a machete, he had opened fire at six places near Vienna's main synagogue. Islamic State later claimed responsibility for the attack.

In a public statement in July last year, Germany's Fed-er-al Pub-lic Pros-e-cu-tor General said Drilon G. and Blinor S. were suspected of knowing about the attacks in advance and failing to report them to the police. The statement said special forces and BKA officials had searched the two men's addresses in the German cities of Kassel and Osnabrueck.

The prosecutor's office, calling the men "suspected accomplices in the attack," did not mention cryptocurrencies, Binance, or any evidence they funded Fejzulai. Their lawyers confirmed to Reuters both were targets of the BKA's criminal investigation.

The pair had been in close contact with Fejzulai on social media before the attacks, the prosecutors' statement said, and in July 2020 stayed at his apartment in Vienna for several days along with Islamists from Austria and Switzerland. It highlighted their "close personal relationship with the assassin and their shared radical Islamic sentiments."

	<p>Blinor S. told Reuters there was no evidence for prosecutors' claims. Drilon G. said the accusations were false and he didn't "have anything to do with the horrible terror attack." The prosecutor's office declined to comment, saying the investigations were ongoing.</p> <p>The prosecutor's office said DNA from unspecified participants at the Vienna meetings was later found on Fejzulai's weapons and on an Islamic State ring he wore during the attack.</p> <p>Just before Fejzulai began his assault on the evening of Nov. 2, Blinor S. and Drilon G. deleted communications with Fejzulai on their mobile phones and social media profiles, it said.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 IS claims Herat bombing</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/islamic-state-claims-responsibility-attack-heart-afghanistan-2022-01-23/">https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/islamic-state-claims-responsibility-attack-heart-afghanistan-2022-01-23/</a>
GIST	<p>CAIRO, Jan 23 (Reuters) - Islamic State claimed responsibility for a deadly attack on Saturday in the western Afghan city of Herat, it said in a post on Telegram on Sunday.</p> <p>At least six people were killed when a blast ripped through a minivan in the city, officials said. Since the Taliban took over in August, a series of blasts and attacks, some claimed by Islamic State, have taken place across Afghanistan.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Standoff: Syria prison holding IS militants</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-syria-prisons-islamic-state-group-0ea9cea6c7ba28ed5e23459479f6974a">https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-syria-prisons-islamic-state-group-0ea9cea6c7ba28ed5e23459479f6974a</a>
GIST	<p>BEIRUT (AP) — Clashes between U.S.-backed Syrian Kurdish fighters and militants continued for a fourth day Sunday near a prison in northeastern Syria that houses thousands of members of the Islamic State group, the Kurdish force said.</p> <p>The standoff follows a bold assault by the extremists that breached the premises of Gweiran Prison, allowed an unknown number of militants to escape and killed dozens of U.S.-backed fighters who guard the facility.</p> <p>The Kurdish-led forces, with assistance from the U.S-led coalition in the form of surveillance, intelligence and airstrikes, have contained the threat, the coalition said in a statement Sunday.</p> <p>Several dozen militants remain holed up in one wing of the prison, to the north and in adjacent buildings, from where they have been firing at the Kurdish forces.</p> <p>A spokesman for the Kurdish forces, Farhad Shami, said the militants have used hundreds of minors held in the same facility as human shields, preventing a final assault.</p> <p>More than 3,000 suspected IS militants are believed to be held in Gweiran, the largest facility in Syria housing IS militants, including over 600 under the age of 18.</p> <p>“While it is militarily defeated, Daesh remains an existential threat to the region,” said Commander of the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve Maj. Gen. John W. Brennan, using the Arabic acronym for IS. “Due to its severely degraded capability, Daesh’s future survival is dependent on its ability to refill its ranks through poorly-conceived attempts” like the Gweiran prison attack.</p> <p>The coalition said it was analyzing the situation to determine if the group is still planning other such attacks in Syria and Iraq.</p>

In their attack, the IS militants had attempted to destroy a new, more secure facility under construction next to the Gweiran prison, and have seized arms from prison guards before murdering them, the coalition added.

The Kurdish forces said militants on Sunday staged a new attack on the prison, also known as al-Sinaa prison, in an attempt to break the security cordon and support inmates still in control of parts of the prison.

In a statement, the Kurdish-led force known as the Syrian Democratic Forces, said the attack on the northern section of the prison in the city of Hassakeh was repelled and the militants were chased into a nearby residential area.

Another SDF spokesman Siamand Ali said IS fighters arriving from outside the city also tried to attack the prison and were repelled.

A resident near the prison said warplanes from the U.S.-led coalition flew over the prison earlier Sunday, breaking the sound barrier. The resident, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retribution, said the U.S.-backed Kurdish forces were heard calling on IS militants in the prison and in surrounding buildings to turn themselves in. A war monitor, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said helicopters threw fliers over the city, urging residents to report suspicious activities.

The militants have taken cover in residential areas surrounding the prison, including in Zuhour neighborhood which was cordoned off by security forces. Hundreds of civilians fled the area for safety. Ali said between 150 and 200 militants are believed currently holed up in the northern wing of the prison and adjacent residential area.

The attack launched Thursday was the biggest by IS militants since the fall of the group's "caliphate" in 2019. Its demise came after IS lost its last territory in Syria in following a yearslong military campaign backed by the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq and Syria.

The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the prison break on its Aamaq news service Friday, describing it as ongoing.

In an ambitious attack, more than 100 militants armed with heavy machine guns and vehicles rigged with explosives attacked the facility aiming to free their comrades. A car bomb was detonated nearby at a petroleum warehouse, creating a diversion and leaving fire and smoke in the air for two days.

A video posted by the militants late Saturday showed vehicles ramming through what appears to be the walls of the prison, creating large holes. Dozens of men were seen walking in the facility in the dark, seemingly escaping the prison. The Kurdish-led forces said Friday they have so far arrested over 100 inmates who escaped but the total number of fugitives remains unclear.

Freeing convicts and imprisoned comrades has been a main tactic of the group. During their 2014 surge that overwhelmed territory in Iraq and Syria, IS carried out multiple prison breaks.

In another video posted on the IS news service, the militants showed two dozen prison staff, some in military uniforms, taken hostage, including some who appeared bruised and beaten. One militant read out a statement to the camera and another stood guard with what seemed to be either a saw or a machete. Both militants were masked.

The Kurdish forces said late Saturday the men were probably among the prison kitchen staff with whom they lost contact since the assault began late Thursday.

Ali said about 100 militants attacked the prison but it is not clear how many militants from sleeper cells and fugitives are taking part in the ongoing operation.

	<p>In its version of the attack, IS quoted one of its militants in a statement posted late Saturday on its news service who said the attack began with two foreign suicide bombers who detonated two trucks at the gate of the prison and along its walls, causing major damage and casualties. Then militants fanned out, first heading to the prison towers and the petroleum warehouse. A second group attacked a Kurdish post nearby while two other groups clashed with nearby patrols and cut supply lines to undermine the prison defenses.</p> <p>The assault coincided with riots inside the prison, where militants seized weapons and held guards and prison staff hostage, the militant group said, claiming that it freed more than 800 militants, some of whom are taking part in the ongoing operation.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Taliban in Norway; Afghan humanitarian aid</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/talks-with-taliban-begin-in-norway-281532ba4dc8ba968ed7a6643aa31c71">https://apnews.com/article/talks-with-taliban-begin-in-norway-281532ba4dc8ba968ed7a6643aa31c71</a>
GIST	<p>OSLO, Norway (AP) — A Taliban delegation led by acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi on Sunday started three days of talks in Oslo with Western officials and Afghan civil society representatives amid a deteriorating humanitarian situation in Afghanistan.</p> <p>The closed-door meetings are taking place at a hotel in the snow-capped mountains above the Norwegian capital. On Sunday, Taliban representatives were meeting with women’s rights activists and human rights defenders from Afghanistan and from the Afghan diaspora.</p> <p>Before the talks, the Taliban’s deputy minister of culture and information tweeted a voice message from Muttaqi, expressing hope for “a good trip full of achievements” and thanking Norway, a country he hoped will become “a gateway for a positive relationship with Europe.”</p> <p>The trip is the first time since the Taliban took over in August that their representatives have held official meetings in Europe. Earlier, they have traveled to Russia, Iran, Qatar, Pakistan, China and Turkmenistan.</p> <p>During the talks, Muttaqi is certain to press the Taliban’s demand that nearly \$10 billion frozen by the United States and other Western countries be released as Afghanistan faces a precarious humanitarian situation.</p> <p>The United Nations has managed to provide some liquidity and allowed the new administration to pay for imports, including electricity. But the U.N. has warned that as many as 1 million Afghan children are in danger of starving and most of the country’s 38 million people are living below the poverty line.</p> <p>The Norwegian Foreign Ministry said the Taliban delegation would also meet with Afghans in Norway, including “women leaders, journalists and people who work with, among other things, human rights and humanitarian, economic, social and political issues.”</p> <p>“Norway continues to engage in dialogue with the Taliban to promote human rights, women’s participation in society, and to strengthen humanitarian and economic efforts in Afghanistan,” the Foreign Ministry said in a statement.</p> <p>A U.S. delegation, led by Special Representative for Afghanistan Tom West, plans to discuss “the formation of a representative political system; responses to the urgent humanitarian and economic crises; security and counterterrorism concerns; and human rights, especially education for girls and women,” according to a statement released by the U.S. State Department.</p> <p>On Friday, Norwegian Foreign Minister Anniken Huitfeldt stressed that the visit was “not a legitimization or recognition of the Taliban. But we must talk to those who in practice govern the country today.”</p> <p>“We are extremely concerned about the serious situation in Afghanistan,” Huitfeldt said, noting that economic and political conditions have created “a full-scale humanitarian catastrophe for millions of people” facing starvation in the country.</p>

	<p>Holding the talks has created some controversy in Norway, a NATO country involved in Afghanistan from 2001 until the Taliban take over last summer. On Sunday, 200 protesters gathered on an icy square in front of the Norwegian Foreign Ministry in Oslo to condemn the meeting.</p> <p>“The Taliban has not changed as some in the international community like to say,” said Ahman Yasir, a Norwegian Afghan living in Norway for around two decades. “They are as brutal as they were in 2001 and before.”</p> <p>The Scandinavian country, home to the Nobel Peace Prize, is no stranger to diplomacy. It has been involved in peace efforts in a number of countries, including Mozambique, Afghanistan, Venezuela, Colombia, the Philippines, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Syria, Myanmar, Somalia, Sri Lanka and South Sudan.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Winter in Afghanistan's slums</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/23/ive-already-sold-my-daughters-now-my-kidney-winter-in-afghanistans-slums">https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/23/ive-already-sold-my-daughters-now-my-kidney-winter-in-afghanistans-slums</a>
GIST	<p>The temperature is dropping to below zero in western <a href="#">Afghanistan</a> and Delaram Rahmati is struggling to find food for her eight children.</p> <p>Since leaving the family home in the country's Badghis province four years ago, the Rahmatis have been living in a mud hut with a plastic roof in one of Herat city's slums. <a href="#">Drought made their village unliveable</a> and the land unworkable. Like an estimated 3.5 million Afghans who have been forced to leave their homes, the Rahmatis now live in a neighbourhood for internally displaced people (IDP).</p> <p>There are no jobs. But the 50-year-old has hospital fees to pay for two of her sons, one of whom is paralysed and the other who has mental illness, as well as medicine for her husband.</p> <p>“I was forced to sell two of my daughters, an eight- and six-year-old,” she says. Rahmati says she sold her daughters a few months ago for 100,000 afghani each (roughly £700), to families she doesn't know. Her daughters will stay with her until they reach puberty and then be handed over to strangers.</p> <p>It is not uncommon in Afghanistan to arrange the sale of a daughter into a future marriage but raise her at home until it is time for her to leave. However, as <a href="#">the country's economic crisis</a> deepens, families are reporting that they are handing children over at an increasingly young age because they cannot afford to feed them.</p> <p>Yet, selling her daughters' future was not the only agonising decision Rahmati was forced to make. “Because of debt and hunger I was forced to sell my kidney,” she tells Rukhshana Media from outside her home in the Herat slum.</p> <p>Afghanistan is on the brink of “a humanitarian crisis and economic collapse”, according to the UN. The agency's ambassador to Afghanistan has said it is “experiencing the worst humanitarian crisis of its contemporary history”. Drought, Covid-19 and the economic sanctions imposed after the <a href="#">Taliban seized power in August 2021</a> have had catastrophic consequences on the economy. Dramatic rises in inflation have resulted in soaring food prices.</p> <p>The kidney trade has been growing in Afghanistan for some time. But since the Taliban took power, the price and conditions under which the illegal organ trade takes place has changed. The price of a kidney, which once ranged from \$3,500 to \$4,000 (£2,600 to £3,000), has dropped to less than \$1,500 (£1,100). But the number of volunteers keeps rising.</p> <p>Rahmati sold her right kidney for 150,000 afghani (£1,000). But her recovery from the operation has not been good and now, like her husband, she is also sick, with no money left to visit a doctor.</p>



More than half of the country's estimated 40 million population face "extreme levels of hunger, and nearly 9 million of them are at risk of famine", according to [the UN refugee agency, UNHCR](#). For a growing number of Afghans, selling a kidney is their only way to get money to eat.

"It has been months since we last ate rice. We hardly find bread and tea. Three nights a week, we can't afford to eat dinner," says Salahuddin Taheri, who lives in the same slum as the Rahmati family.

Taheri, a 27-year-old father of four, who scrapes together enough money for five loaves of bread each day by collecting and selling recycled rubbish, is looking for a buyer for his kidney. "I have been asking private hospitals in Herat for many days if they need any kidney. I even told them if they need it urgently, I can sell it below the market price, but I haven't heard back," Taheri says. "I need to feed my children, I have no other choice."

In the past five years about 250 official kidney transplants have taken place in the hospitals in Herat province, with a very limited number being a family member donating their organ, says Asif Kabir, a public health official in the province. The cost of a kidney transplant is 400,000 afghani, plus the price of the kidney, according to Kabir.

But the true number of kidney operations may be far higher. A doctor working in one of the hospitals where most of the transplants take place, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, says: "Recently the number of people who want to sell their kidney has increased in Herat and most of them live in the displaced camps, in Herat's slums. The customers also go to the displaced camps to find a cheap kidney."

Sayed Ashraf Sadat, a civil society activist in Herat, was a member of a delegation assigned by president Ashraf Ghani to investigate the illegal kidney trade in May 2021.

"We found that the hospitals were not working according to the law. People are working inside and outside the country to encourage people to sell their kidneys. These people get them visas and send them to the other side of the border. There is more demand for kidney transplants outside Afghanistan. Countries like Iran need kidneys, and poor Afghans are forced to sell them."

Sadat says the investigation he was part of identified two hospitals in Herat where kidney transplant operations take place; one of them said it had completed 194 operations and the other said 32, but more than 500 people were claiming to have sold their kidney, 100 from a single village in Herat. "This shows the kidneys were taken outside Afghanistan," says Sadat.

"For example, a kidney is purchased for 300,000 afghani (£2,100) inside Afghanistan, and it is sold for more than £7,500 to £11,000 outside the country," says Sadat.

"We found evidence that some are encouraged to sell their kidneys, taken outside the borders, and their kidneys are sold for 200,000 to 400,000 afghanis," says Sadat. "It seems that the doctors are involved in the illegal trade. But unfortunately, our investigation was stopped due to a worsening security situation."

Two months have passed since Rahmati's kidney operation, and the money has already gone to pay off medical debt. Her recovery from the operation continues to go badly.

"I am so sick. I couldn't even walk because the wound has been infected. It is very painful," she says, adding that the recipient of her kidney only paid for the operation fee, two nights in hospital and her first medicine bill.

On the day of the transplant, Rahmati was sick and the doctors refused to operate. "I couldn't breathe properly, so the doctors took me down from the hospital bed, but I returned. I told them 'I am happy with my own death, but I can't tolerate seeing my children hungry and ill'," she says.

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SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/angry-outbursts-and-cool-determination-inside-the-synagogue-attackers-18-day-journey-to-terror/2022/01/22/2015da20-7931-11ec-83e1-eaef0fe4b8c9_story.html">https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/angry-outbursts-and-cool-determination-inside-the-synagogue-attackers-18-day-journey-to-terror/2022/01/22/2015da20-7931-11ec-83e1-eaef0fe4b8c9_story.html</a>
GIST	<p>Sometimes Malik Faisal Akram stood out, in unsettling ways. <a href="#">Back home in Blackburn</a>, in England’s industrial north, he was the guy who was banned from the local courthouse after he threatened officials there. In his short stay in Texas, Akram stuck in the minds of people — at a mosque <a href="#">where he became aggressive</a> when he was told he couldn’t stay overnight and at a Starbucks when workers noticed him as the disheveled customer who sat for half an hour, constantly looking around as he nursed his cappuccinos.</p> <p>But along his 4,600-mile journey from Britain to the Colleyville, Tex., synagogue where Akram would <a href="#">hold four hostages for 11 hours</a> before being killed by law enforcement officers last Sunday, the 44-year-old terrorist also managed impressive stealth, entering the United States without a hitch, eluding notice in New York for several days, and wandering around Dallas and its suburbs for two weeks without attracting much attention.</p> <p>Nearly a week after Akram terrorized the rabbi and three members of Congregation Beth Israel, <a href="#">investigators are still examining</a> where he slept, how he moved around and with whom he associated during his 18 days in the United States.</p> <p>He evidently knew some people: After he arrived at New York’s John F. Kennedy International Airport on Dec. 29, Akram bought a cellphone and made calls to someone at a New York number, according to investigators. After Akram landed in Dallas around New Year’s Day, he met up with a man who took him to a center for homeless people, walked him inside and embraced him before saying farewell.</p> <p>The FBI said Friday that it has learned many details about Akram’s movements and contacts, although key questions remain outstanding, such as how he obtained the gun he brandished at Beth Israel. As recently as late this week, FBI agents were still knocking on doors at motels and checking footage from surveillance cameras in an effort to put together the pieces of the puzzle.</p> <p>“This was both a hate crime and an act of terrorism ... rooted in antisemitism,” the FBI’s special agent in charge of its Dallas office, Matthew DeSarno, said Friday, adding that the investigation will continue.</p> <p>What is known is that Akram began the trip he knew would end in his death <a href="#">at home in Blackburn</a>, a heavily Muslim town filled with Pakistani and Indian immigrants — including Akram’s parents.</p> <p>Akram grew up in a religiously conservative neighborhood. His father, Malik, founded a small mosque, one of more than 40 Muslim houses of worship in the town of 120,000 people.</p> <p>Akram had struggled with mental illness, according to his younger brother, Gulbar, who declined to elaborate.</p> <p>In 2001, days after the terrorist attacks that killed 3,000 Americans, took down the World Trade Center and opened a flaming gash in the Pentagon, Akram was banned from court buildings in Blackburn after he told a court usher that he wished he had been on one of the planes used as weapons of war on Sept. 11. The ban was the first issued by the Blackburn court in 25 years.</p> <p>It wasn’t Akram’s first brush with the law. He had been sent a warning letter several months earlier after he was accused of abusing and threatening staffers at the Northgate courthouse, according to local news reports.</p> <p>A letter from Deputy Justice Clerk Peter Wells informed Akram of the ban, saying that “Once again you were threatening and abusive towards court staff ... This caused a great deal of distress to an individual who was simply doing his job and should not be subjected to your foul abuse.”</p> <p>“I’m innocent,” Akram told the Lancashire Telegraph at the time. “People at the court have just got it in for me because they don’t like me.”</p>

Akram was convicted of theft and harassment in 2012, according to a letter from Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.) to FBI and Homeland Security officials seeking details on the investigation.

MI5, Britain's counterintelligence and security agency, investigated Akram and put him on a watch list in 2020 as a "subject of interest." But the authorities concluded that he did not pose any imminent threat of terrorism.

Akram's family had no idea that Faisal, as he was known, planned to leave the country, Gulbar said, leaving him to wonder: "He's known to police. Got a criminal record. How was he allowed to get a visa and acquire a gun?"

Akram arrived at JFK Airport in New York on Dec. 29, drawing no special attention as he cleared the immigration and customs area. He wasn't known to U.S. intelligence or law enforcement, DeSarno said Friday, and a federal government official confirmed that Akram had not previously visited the United States.

As a British citizen, Akram entered the country under the Visa Waiver Program, which allows people from 40 countries to visit the United States for up to 90 days without a visa, according to Homeland Security officials.

A Homeland Security official who spoke Friday on the condition of anonymity to discuss an ongoing investigation said Akram was vetted as any other traveler would be under that program, with his name run "through several federal law enforcement and intelligence agencies' databases ... No derogatory information associated with this individual was found prior to his travel to the United States or upon his arrival."

If U.S. authorities knew of Akram's arrest record, his case would have been evaluated to determine "whether an individual should be permitted to enter the United States based on the nature of the arrest," the official said.

The New York address Akram gave immigration authorities was that of the Queens Hotel, a tidy little place on Queens Boulevard about 10 miles from the airport. The hotel is often the first property to pop up on a Google search for "Hotel in Queens," or "Queens Hotel." A room goes for about \$80, though it would have been more during Christmas week.

But the hotel has no record of a guest with Akram's name staying there on Dec. 29 or 30, said Ann Lin, who works at the hotel's front desk. Lin didn't recognize Akram's photograph beyond a vague sense that he looked like "many guests with a beard like that who stay here," she said.

Staffers at two nearby mosques and another hotel said they did not recognize a photo of Akram.

Soon after he got to New York, Akram bought a cellphone with a New York area code and made several calls to another local number, according to a law enforcement official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss an ongoing investigation. The authorities have identified that person, who does not appear to have participated in Akram's plan, the official said.

By tracing data from Akram's phone and computer, American and British investigators have cobbled together an outline of his movements and online searches as he searched for a target, officials said.

Akram [believed that Jews hold enormous political power](#) and could achieve the release of [Aafia Siddiqui](#), an American-educated Pakistani who is a convicted terrorist in a federal facility in Fort Worth. She is serving an 86-year sentence for shooting at U.S. soldiers and FBI agents. With that apparently in mind, Akram used his new phone to search for names of U.S. rabbis, officials said.

He focused on Angela Buchdahl, the senior rabbi at Manhattan's Central Synagogue, one of the country's largest Reform Jewish congregations. Investigators believe Akram saw Buchdahl mentioned on online lists of influential rabbis and decided she had the political prowess to get Siddiqui released.

During the hostage standoff in Texas, Akram would demand that Beth Israel's rabbi, Charlie Cytron-Walker, get Buchdahl on the phone.

"He mentioned her by name, because he knew that she played guitar. ... He thought that she was the most influential rabbi," Cytron-Walker said Thursday in an online forum hosted by the Anti-Defamation League.

It's not clear where Akram stayed in New York or what else he did there, but during the hostage situation, he claimed he had planted explosives in Manhattan and Brooklyn "potentially in and around synagogues, and that he had associates in New York," according to Mitch Silber, director of a community security initiative at the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York. Investigators have concluded that those claims were baseless, officials said.

By New Year's Day, Akram had flown to Dallas. He showed up that evening at the Islamic Center of Irving, just south of Dallas Fort Worth International Airport and 13 miles from Congregation Beth Israel.

During evening prayer, sometime between 7 p.m. and 7:30 p.m., Akram arrived at the mosque and soon became aggressive, said Khalid Hamideh, a lawyer and spokesman for the Islamic Center.

After joining in the final prayer, Akram asked a security guard whether he could stay overnight in the mosque. The guard summoned a staff member, who told Akram that no one could sleep there because of city and mosque regulations, Hamideh said.

Akram shattered the solemn quiet of the room, angrily addressing the staffer, Hamideh said.

"You will be judged by God for not helping a fellow Muslim," Akram said loudly. "I'm from a good family."

The lawyer said Akram accused the staff member of "not helping out a fellow brother in the faith."

Hamideh said Akram was carrying a backpack large enough to hold a weapon.

"God knows if he already had acquired the gun," Hamideh said.

Akram was not searched, Hamideh said: "We don't search anybody. Maybe we'll start."

Video from the mosque's surveillance cameras revealed that Akram left that evening but returned the next morning, Jan. 2, at about 6 a.m. for morning prayers.

"His whole attitude changed," Hamideh said. "He was humble. You can see him praying. He's low-keyed, peaceful. When he was praying, he was praying alone," to the side of the small prayer group.

After sunrise, sometime between 7 a.m. and 8 a.m., the mosque's 80 surveillance cameras followed Akram as he walked out of the prayer room and into a hallway, where he put on his shoes and left, walking alone toward a busy four-lane road.

Over the next few days, Akram returned to the mosque at least once, possibly twice, wearing the same clothes he had on during his first visit, Hamideh said.

Akram — now "calm, cool, collected," according to the lawyer — sought out the staff member he had confronted earlier and "apologized for his behavior on the previous night," Hamideh said, "and asked for permission just to use the sanctuary to conduct his prayer."

Akram sat in on a halaqa, a session devoted to study of Koranic texts.

“His visits after the first visit were all very nice, formal, professional, low key,” Hamideh said.

By the evening of Jan. 2, Akram had made his way 17 miles to the east, to a homeless shelter in a scruffy industrial zone just across Interstate 30 from downtown Dallas.

At 10:01 p.m., Akram was escorted into the intake unit of the OurCalling shelter by an unidentified man who had driven him there, according to Wayne Walker, the facility’s chief executive.

The man — heavysset, wearing a gray hooded sweatshirt and a black beanie — embraced Akram, patting him on the back several times before walking away, according to surveillance video shown to The Washington Post. The video has been turned over to the FBI.

“We have no idea who that person is,” said Patrick Palmer, chief advancement officer at the shelter, part of a Christian ministry for the homeless.

Akram and the man who accompanied him appeared to be familiar with each other, talking in the parking lot on their way in, Walker said.

Other than that, though, among the 191 people who went into the shelter on a frigid night when the Dallas temperature fell to 18 degrees, “there was nothing that stood out about” Akram, said Ed Johnson, the shelter’s programs director, who checked Akram in.

Inside, Akram took a rapid test for the coronavirus and answered routine intake questions: Was he a veteran? Did he have insurance? Any income?

Akram allowed staff to take his photo and provided his real name, Walker said.

Akram did not answer a question about where he had come from, Walker said. People who stay at the shelter are not searched.

Akram “identified himself as living on the streets,” Palmer said, and was given a spot on the floor where he could sleep.

He left OurCalling at about 8 a.m., after getting a to-go breakfast. Akram did not return for lunch, Palmer said, and executives at OurCalling didn’t see Akram again until his name emerged in media reports about the Beth Israel incident.

It’s not clear where Akram spent his days or nights through most of the first week of the new year. At a Super 8 motel half a mile from the Irving mosque, FBI agents paid a visit Thursday, asking whether Akram had stayed there, according to a desk clerk. The clerk told The Post that Akram’s name does not appear in the \$57-a-night motel’s computer system.

Between Jan. 6 and Jan. 13, Akram turned up on three nights at Union Gospel Mission Dallas, a homeless shelter, according to its chief executive, Bruce Butler.

“We were a way station for him,” he said. “He was very quiet. He was in and out.”

Akram left the mission for the last time on the morning of Jan. 13, two days before he showed up at Beth Israel, according to Gospel Mission records.

During his time in and around Dallas, Akram searched on his phone for gun shops and pawnshops in the area, law enforcement officials said.

But authorities traced the handgun he brandished at Beth Israel, concluding that he bought it on the street, not at a business. The gun's last legal sale was recorded in early 2020. Later that year, it was reported stolen from a hotel room, officials said.

While Akram was in Texas, his web searches fixated on Siddiqui, who is imprisoned at a medical unit of a federal prison in Fort Worth following a July incident in which another inmate attacked her, burning her face with "scalding hot liquid," according to a lawsuit filed on Siddiqui's behalf.

Akram also searched for the names of rabbis he believed to be politically influential — and for a synagogue close to where Siddiqui is being held, leading him to focus on Beth Israel, DeSarno said.

On Friday, Jan. 14, Akram wandered around Colleyville, a suburb of 26,000 people just west of DFW airport. He spent 16 hours somewhere in the synagogue's area, "walking around with what I have in my bag, and with my ammo," he told police negotiators during the early hours of the standoff, according to a live stream of the Sabbath service that aired on Facebook Live.

On Saturday morning, before going to Beth Israel, Akram visited a Starbucks less than a mile away. Two baristas noticed the tall, disheveled man wearing a puffy black jacket and carrying a blue backpack.

After ordering, Akram asked a barista for the time. It was 8:43 a.m., she recalled.

Akram stood out in part because of his strong accent, which one barista said she had trouble understanding as he ordered a tall cappuccino, and because he proceeded to sit at a corner table for somewhere between 30 minutes and an hour, staring at his phone and frequently looking around him.

He ordered a second cappuccino; when he finished it, he hurried out.

He arrived by bicycle at Congregation Beth Israel, a sand-colored building set well back from the road, officials said Friday. It's a four-minute ride from the Starbucks to the temple, which sits on a street of large houses, near the local middle school and Baptist and Catholic churches.

The 10 a.m. Sabbath service was about to begin, with only four congregants attending in person; most worshippers would watch online as a precaution against the coronavirus. That evening, Beth Israel members were scheduled to gather for Trivia Night.

Akram knocked on the synagogue's locked glass door.

"He was looking for a place to warm up," Jeffrey Cohen, the congregation's vice president and one of the hostages, told MSNBC. "And we invited him in, the rabbi gave him a cup of tea, he let him sit in the back."

Cohen greeted the man.

"He was quite jovial, he was friendly," he said. "He was on the phone, so I let him go onto the phone."

The service began. More than half an hour in, the rabbi began the Amidah, the core of the prayer service, recited while facing Jerusalem.

"And then we heard — or I heard, excuse me — that unmistakable click of a semiautomatic being loaded," Cohen said.

Akram started yelling.

Eleven terrifying hours would follow.

	<p>Along the way, Akram spoke on the phone to his brother Gulbar, who urged him to release the hostages, serve time in prison and return to his family. Akram shouted that he intended to die.</p> <p>“I’m going to go toe-to-toe with [police], and they can shoot me dead,” he said. “I’m coming home in a body bag.”</p> <p>Down the block, a Colleyville police officer banged on the door of a neighbor’s house.</p> <p>“You guys got a car?” the officer asked. “Okay, go ahead and get in it and head out of here. We got a situation next door.”</p> <p>Through long hours of negotiation, Akram was at times calm and conversational, at times angry and erratic, according to two hostages. Finally, the FBI’s DeSarno said Friday, “the situation had gone from bad to significantly worse” as Akram realized that his demand for Siddiqui’s release would not be met. When Akram had a glass of juice in his hand, the rabbi saw his moment, threw a chair at his captor and urged the other hostages out the door.</p> <p>Seconds after the hostages ran to safety, police moved in. After a big bang and two spurts of gunfire, Akram was dead.</p> <p>An autopsy report released Friday said he died at 9:22 p.m. of “multiple gunshot wounds.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Saudi-led airstrikes in Yemen kill scores</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/world/middleeast/yemen-saudi-arabia-airstrike.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/world/middleeast/yemen-saudi-arabia-airstrike.html</a>
GIST	<p>CAIRO — The seven-year-old war in Yemen intensified again on Friday when airstrikes by the Saudi-led military coalition on northern Yemen killed at least 70 people and knocked out the entire country’s internet, according to international aid groups and the rebels who control the area.</p> <p>Capping a week in which rebel drones struck as far away as Abu Dhabi and Saudi bombs rained down across rebel-held northern Yemen, the hostilities were fresh proof of the conflict’s obstinacy a year after President Biden took office vowing to bring the war — and one of the world’s worst humanitarian disasters — to an end.</p> <p>After months of territorial gains by the Houthis, the Iran-backed rebels who control northern Yemen, forces backed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have managed to claw back some territory and shift the momentum of the war. Those offensives have snarled international efforts to push the two sides toward peace.</p> <p>Friday’s strikes, which hit targets across Houthi-controlled territory including a prison and damaged the country’s internet infrastructure, raised the risk of heating things up even further.</p> <p>In the northern city of Saada near the Saudi border, where an airstrike destroyed a temporary detention facility, the Republic Hospital had received around 70 dead and 138 wounded and could not take any more, said Ahmed Mahat, the head of Doctors Without Borders’ mission in Yemen. Two other hospitals in the city were flooded with growing numbers of injured patients, even as their medical supplies thinned, Doctors Without Borders said.</p> <p>Yahya Shaim, a health official for Saada, said in a phone interview that the number of casualties had risen to 267, including 77 dead and 190 injured, adding that there were about 50 people still under the rubble.</p> <p>“There are many bodies still at the scene of the airstrike, many missing people,” Mr. Mahat said in a statement, citing a Doctors Without Borders colleague in Saada. “It is impossible to know how many people have been killed. It seems to have been a horrific act of violence.”</p>



The International Committee of the Red Cross said more than 100 people had been killed or injured overnight in the detention center in Saada.

Emergency workers were still combing the ruined building for victims as the day went on, the Red Cross said. Video broadcast on Al Mayadeen, a pro-Iran news channel, showed rescuers trying to clear rubble at the site to free people trapped in the debris.

Local media linked to the Houthis blamed the Saudi-led coalition that has been fighting the Houthis since 2015. Though the aid groups were more cautious about assigning responsibility, the Saudi-led coalition has repeatedly bombed Houthi forces and territory, including civilian targets, throughout the course of the war, killing thousands of civilians.

The coalition ramped up attacks over the last week after the Houthis [attacked a major airport](#) in the U.A.E. — Saudi Arabia's chief partner in the coalition — with drones and missiles on Monday, killing three people and wounding six, in what they said was retaliation for the U.A.E.'s support for pro-government militias.

Armed and trained by the U.A.E., those militias had recently reclaimed parts of Shabwa province from Houthi control and were encroaching on Houthi gains in oil-rich Marib province. Marib and Shabwa saw much of the worst fighting in Yemen over the last year after the Houthis launched an offensive last February to seize key oil infrastructure from the Saudi-backed government.

Another coalition airstrike early Friday morning hit a telecommunications hub in the port city of Al Hudaydah, severely damaging critical internet infrastructure and plunging Yemen into an internet blackout, said a telecommunications ministry official in Hadramout province who asked not to be named because he was not authorized to speak about the incident.

Save the Children said the strike killed three children who were playing on a soccer field nearby.

The country lost internet connectivity starting around 1 a.m. on Friday, [according to NetBlocks](#), an internet monitoring group, and Cloudflare, a web security company, and service had not resumed by Friday evening.

The Saudi-led coalition responded to the Houthi attacks on the U.A.E. by striking the Houthi-controlled capital, Sana, on Monday evening, and killing what Houthi media said were at least 20 people, including the family of a Houthi military general.

On Friday, Mr. Mahat said the latest airstrikes had also hit Sana and its airport, and that the aid group had received numerous reports of overnight airstrikes elsewhere across northern Yemen.

But none appeared to have been as deadly as the attack on the prison in Saada. No other information about the victims was immediately available, but Save the Children said early reports indicated that most were [African migrants](#), who attempt to cross through Yemen on their way to seek work in Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries.

The Houthis first swept to power in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring uprising against Yemen's authoritarian dictator, Ali Abdullah Saleh, whose successor, his deputy, struggled to contend with Yemen's corruption, unemployment and a separatist movement.

After they overran the capital in 2014 and 2015, forcing the Saudi-backed government to flee, the Saudi-led coalition began targeting them, fearing that their Iranian sponsors would gain a foothold in Saudi Arabia's backyard.

Now divided between Houthi control in the north and Saudi-backed government control in the south, Yemen has become the site of what aid groups say is one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters, with

millions of people living in famine-like conditions, an economy in collapse and basic services, including many hospitals, in tatters.

Within a month of taking office, Mr. Biden had promised to push for ending the war in Yemen, partly by cutting off arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Yet as the Houthis gained ground last year, the Biden administration announced in November that it would [sell \\$650 million of air-to-air missiles](#), which it classified as defensive weaponry, to the kingdom.

It was unclear whether the weapons used in the airstrikes had been provided by the United States, which in recent years has been by far the largest arms seller to Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, which [monitors weapons transfers](#).

Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke to Saudi Arabia's foreign minister on Friday to emphasize "the U.S. commitment to help Gulf partners improve their capabilities to defend against threats from Yemen," the State Department said in a statement, adding that he had "underscored the importance of mitigating civilian harm." Mr. Blinken condemned the Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. on Monday, the statement said. Asked about the Saudi-led attacks on Yemen on Friday, the State Department declined to comment.

The Saudi-led bombings on Friday came on the same day that the United Nations Security Council, meeting at the request of the U.A.E., unanimously condemned what the council called the "heinous terrorist attacks in Abu Dhabi" earlier in the week, as well as on sites in Saudi Arabia.

But Mona Juul, the ambassador from Norway and the council's president for January, also told reporters she was appalled by vastly deadlier Saudi bombings in Yemen, including Friday's strike on the prison.

"We are very concerned," she told reporters outside the council's chambers. "It's not acceptable."

Questioned about the severity of the strike, the Emirati ambassador, Lana Nusseibeh, said that the coalition "undertakes to abide by international law and proportionate response in all its military operations."

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HEADLINE	01/21 ISIS attacks Syria prison, Iraq army post
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/world/middleeast/isis-prison-syria-jail.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/world/middleeast/isis-prison-syria-jail.html</a>
GIST	<p>BEIRUT, Lebanon — Fighters from the Islamic State attacked a prison in northeast Syria in an attempt to free thousands of their comrades, one of the boldest assaults by the terrorist group in the Middle East since the fall of its so-called caliphate three years ago, U.S. and Kurdish officials said Friday.</p> <p>The attack, which began Thursday night and was continuing late Friday, set off deadly clashes with the Kurdish-led militia that controls the area, killing dozens of people and allowing scores of prisoners to flee, at least temporarily, the officials said.</p> <p>Across the border in Iraq, Islamic State fighters launched one of the deadliest attacks in months there on Friday, killing 11 Iraqi security force members in a pre-dawn attack on an army post in Diyala Province.</p> <p>The twin attacks highlighted the fragile security that persists in territories once ruled by the Islamic State, and showed that the jihadists, while greatly weakened, can still cause havoc for allies of the United States.</p> <p>The new violence also drew attention to the unfinished business of the military defeat of the group in Iraq and Syria in 2019: tens of thousands of former residents of its so-called caliphate, fighters and their families, who are now indefinitely detained by a United States-backed militia that doesn't want them but can't get rid of them.</p>

The ISIS fighters launched their assault on the prison in the city of Hasaka, Syria, on Thursday evening by detonating a car bomb near the entrance and then unleashing hails of gunfire at the guards, the officials said.

The fighting spilled into the surrounding neighborhood, killing dozens of people, including civilians, and filling the air with automatic gunfire as residents fled.

As the fighters attacked, the prisoners rioted, burning blankets and plastic and trying to help the attackers set them free.

Late Friday, Islamic State fighters still controlled about a quarter of the prison's northern area, and violent clashes continued there and in a neighborhood to the west, said Farhad Shami, the spokesman for the Kurdish-led militia, known as the Syrian Democratic Forces, or S.D.F.

It is unclear how many prisoners managed to escape and for how long.

Mr. Shami said that 89 prisoners had broken out on Friday but were caught by the S.D.F. and returned to the prison. A local news agency [published a video](#) that appeared to be of those men, bearded and with no shirts, being transported in the back of a truck.

Mr. Shami said the S.D.F. was not aware of any successful escapes but that there have been unconfirmed reports of individual prisoners making it out.

Sabereen News, an Iraqi news outlet affiliated with Iranian-backed militias, said dozens of escaped prisoners were arrested near the Syrian-Iraqi border as they tried to flee to Iraq.

The prison holds about 3,500 men who were arrested by the S.D.F. during battles to drive the Islamic State out of territory it controlled in eastern Syria. The militia partnered with an international military coalition led by the United States to fight the Islamic State, which, at its height, ruled territory the size of Britain in Syria and Iraq.

A United States military official said that aircraft from the anti-Islamic-State coalition had carried out at least two airstrikes targeting "a significant number" of Islamic State attackers and escapees outside the prison.

The coalition has surveillance aircraft overhead to try to help the Syrian forces on the ground, but no United States forces were directly involved, the official said.

Mr. Shami said that at least seven of the Kurdish-led security forces had been killed in the clashes, a number that was likely to rise because about 50 others were gravely wounded, some shot by snipers. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a conflict monitor based in Britain, said that 39 Islamic State attackers, 35 members of the Kurdish-backed militia and five civilians had been killed.

The Syrian Observatory said that Islamic State fighters inside the prison were holding guards hostage. Mr. Shami said there were no hostages.

Kurdish officials in northeast Syria have long warned that they did not have the resources to securely hold so many prisoners in a makeshift prison, and that members of the Islamic State still at large would be likely to try to break them out.

Reflecting the diversity of the Islamic State's ranks, the prisoners hail from dozens of countries, most of which have refused to take them back.

During a visit to the prison in 2019, reporters for The New York Times saw hundreds of men, many of them emaciated and injured, dressed in orange jumpsuits and crammed into crowded cells. Those

	<p>interviewed either denied they had been with the Islamic State or claimed to have had nonviolent jobs as teachers or cooks.</p> <p>The Times also found more than 150 children, ages roughly 9 to 14, held in crowded cells. It is not clear where they are now.</p> <p>Mr. Shami said Friday that there were about 700 boys under age 18 in the prison but that he did not know their current situation.</p> <p>Human rights organizations have criticized Western governments for not repatriating their citizens from northeastern Syria, comparing their indefinite detention without trial to the plight of men held in the U.S. detention center in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.</p> <p>In addition to the men held in prisons, more than 60,000 others, mostly women and children, who were detained as the Islamic State's so-called caliphate fell apart are held in camps nearby that aid groups have warned are unsanitary and serve as jihadist recruitment centers.</p> <p>U.S. officials and terrorism experts have warned that the continued detention of these people risks sowing the seeds of a future insurgency.</p> <p>"Unless we find a way to repatriate them, reintegrate them and de-radicalize them, we're giving ourselves a gift of fighters five to seven years down the road," Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the head of the Central Command, said last April.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/20 US bombed Syria dam on 'no strike' list</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/20/us/airstrike-us-isis-dam.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=US%20News">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/20/us/airstrike-us-isis-dam.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=US%20News</a>
GIST	<p>Near the height of the war against the Islamic State in Syria, a sudden riot of explosions rocked the country's largest dam, a towering, 18-story structure on the Euphrates River that held back a 25-mile-long reservoir above a valley where hundreds of thousands of people lived.</p> <p>The Tabqa Dam was a strategic linchpin and the Islamic State controlled it. The explosions on March 26, 2017, knocked dam workers to the ground and everything went dark. Witnesses say one bomb punched down five floors. A fire spread, and crucial equipment failed. The mighty flow of the Euphrates River suddenly had no way through, the <a href="#">reservoir began to rise</a>, and local authorities used loudspeakers to warn people downstream to flee.</p> <p>The Islamic State, the Syrian government and Russia blamed the United States, but the dam was on the U.S. military's "no-strike list" of protected civilian sites and the commander of the U.S. offensive at the time, then-Lt. Gen. Stephen J. Townsend, said allegations of U.S. involvement were based on <a href="#">"crazy reporting."</a></p> <p>"The Tabqa Dam is not a coalition target," he declared emphatically two days after the blasts.</p> <p>In fact, members of a top secret U.S. Special Operations unit called <a href="#">Task Force 9</a> had struck the dam using some of the largest conventional bombs in the U.S. arsenal, including at least one BLU-109 bunker-buster bomb designed to destroy thick concrete structures, according to two former senior officials. And they had done it despite a military report warning not to bomb the dam, because the damage could cause a flood that might kill tens of thousands of civilians.</p> <p>Given the dam's protected status, the decision to strike it would normally have been made high up the chain of command. But the former officials said the task force used a procedural shortcut reserved for emergencies, allowing it to launch the attack without clearance.</p>

Later, three workers who had rushed to the dam to prevent a disaster were killed in a different coalition airstrike, according to dam workers.

The two former officials, who spoke on the condition that they not be named because they were not authorized to discuss the strikes, said some officers overseeing the air war viewed the task force's actions as reckless.

The revelation of Task Force 9's role in the dam attack follows a pattern described by The New York Times: The unit routinely circumvented the rigorous airstrike approval process and hit Islamic State targets in Syria in a way that repeatedly put civilians at risk.

Even with careful planning, hitting a dam with such large bombs would likely have been seen by top leaders as unacceptably dangerous, said Scott F. Murray, a retired Air Force colonel, who planned airstrikes during air campaigns in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kosovo.

"Using a 2,000-pound bomb against a restricted target like a dam is extremely difficult and should have never been done on the fly," he said. "Worst case, those munitions could have absolutely caused the dam to fail."

After the strikes, dam workers stumbled on an ominous piece of good fortune: Five floors deep in the dam's control tower, an American BLU-109 bunker-buster lay on its side, scorched but intact — a dud. If it had exploded, experts say, the whole dam might have failed.

In response to questions from The Times, U.S. Central Command, which oversaw the air war in Syria, acknowledged dropping three 2,000-pound bombs, but denied targeting the dam or sidestepping procedures. A spokesman said that the bombs hit only the towers attached to the dam, not the dam itself, and while top leaders had not been notified beforehand, limited strikes on the towers had been preapproved by the command.

"Analysis had confirmed that strikes on the towers attached to the dam were not considered likely to cause structural damage to the Tabqa Dam itself," Capt. Bill Urban, the chief spokesman for the command, said in the statement. Noting that the dam did not collapse, he added, "That analysis has proved accurate."

"The mission, and the strikes that enabled it, helped return control of the intact Tabqa Dam to the people of Northeast Syria and prevented ISIS from weaponizing it," Captain Urban said. "Had they been allowed to do so, our assessments at the time predicted that they would have inflicted further suffering on the people of Syria."

But the two former officials, who were directly involved in the air war at the time, and Syrian witnesses interviewed by The Times, said the situation was far more dire than the U.S. military publicly claimed.

Critical equipment lay in ruins and the dam stopped functioning entirely. The reservoir quickly rose 50 feet and nearly spilled over the dam, which engineers said would have been catastrophic. The situation grew so desperate that authorities at dams upstream in Turkey cut water flow into Syria to buy time, and sworn enemies in the yearslong conflict — the Islamic State, the Syrian government, Syrian Defense Forces and the United States — called a rare emergency cease-fire so civilian engineers could race to avert a disaster.

Engineers who worked at the dam, who did not want to be identified because they feared reprisal, said it was only through quick work, much of it made at gunpoint as opposing forces looked on, that the dam and the people living downstream of it were saved.

"The destruction would have been unimaginable," a former director at the dam said. "The number of casualties would have exceeded the number of Syrians who have died throughout the war."

### **A Ready-Made Fortress**

The United States went into the war against the Islamic State in 2014 with targeting rules intended to protect civilians and spare critical infrastructure. Striking a dam, or other key civilian sites on the coalition's "no-strike list," required [elaborate vetting](#) and the approval of senior leaders.

But the Islamic State sought to exploit those rules, using civilian no-strike sites as weapons depots, command centers and fighting positions. That included the Tabqa Dam.

The task force's solution to this problem too often was to set aside the rules intended to protect civilians, current and former military personnel said.

Soon, the task force was justifying the vast majority of its airstrikes using emergency self-defense procedures intended to save troops in life-threatening situations, even when no troops were in danger. That allowed it to [quickly hit targets](#) — including no-strike sites — that would have otherwise been off limits.

[Rushed strikes](#) on sites like schools, mosques and markets [killed crowds of women and children](#), according to former service members, [military documents](#) obtained by The Times and reporting at [sites of coalition airstrikes in Syria](#).

Perhaps no single incident shows the brazen use of self-defense rules and the potentially devastating costs more than the strike on the Tabqa Dam.

At the start of the war, the United States saw the dam as a key to victory. The Soviet-designed structure of [earth and concrete](#) stood 30 miles upstream from the Islamic State's self-proclaimed capital, Raqqa, and whoever controlled the dam effectively controlled the city.

Rebel groups [captured the dam](#) in 2013, and the Islamic State took control during its violent expansion in 2014. For the next several years, the militants kept a small garrison in the dam's towers, where the thick concrete walls and sweeping view created a ready-made fortress.

But it also remained a vital piece of civilian infrastructure. Workers at the dam continued to produce electricity for much of the region and regulate water for vast stretches of irrigated farmland.

In March 2017, when the United States and an international coalition launched an offensive to take the region from the Islamic State, they knew they would have to seize the dam to prevent the enemy from intentionally flooding allied forces downstream.

Task Force 9 was in charge of the ground offensive and had been devising ways to take the dam for months before the strike, according to one former official. The task force ordered a report from specialized engineers in the Defense Intelligence Agency's Defense Resources and Infrastructure office to assess what size of bombs could safely be used in an attack.

The agency soon came back with a clear recommendation: Do not strike the dam.

In a presentation that ran about four pages, according to the two former officials, the engineers said small weapons like Hellfire missiles, which have 20-pound warheads, could be used on the earthen sections of the dam, but it was unsafe to use any bombs or missiles, no matter the size, on the concrete structures that controlled the flow of water.

The former officials said the report warned that a strike could cause a critical malfunction and a devastating flood that could kill tens of thousands of people. The findings echoed [a United Nations report](#) from January 2017, which stated that if attacks on the dam caused it to fail, communities for more than 100 miles downstream would be flooded.

The military report was completed several weeks before the strike and sent to the task force, one former official said. But in the final week of March 2017, a team of task force operators on the ground decided to strike the dam anyway, using some of the biggest conventional bombs available.

## **2,000-Pound Bombs**

It is unclear what spurred the task force attack on March 26.

At the time, the U.S.-led coalition controlled the north shore of the reservoir and the Islamic State controlled the south. The two sides had been in a standoff for weeks.

Captain Urban said that U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces tried to take control of the dam and came under fire from enemy fighters, taking “heavy casualties.” Then the coalition struck the dam.

Dam workers said they saw no heavy fighting or casualties that day before the bombs hit.

What is clear is that Task Force 9 operators called in a self-defense strike, which meant they did not have to seek permission from the chain of command.

A [military report](#) obtained through a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit shows the operators contacted a [B-52 bomber circling high overhead](#) and requested an immediate airstrike on three targets. But the report makes no mention of enemy forces firing or heavy casualties. Instead, it says the operators requested the strikes for “terrain denial.”

The two former officials said the terrain denial request suggested that allied forces were not in danger of being overrun by enemy fighters, and that the task force’s goal was likely to preemptively destroy fighting positions in the towers.

Launching that type of offensive strike under self-defense rules was a stunning departure from how the air war was supposed to work, the officials said.

Just a few weeks later, when the United States decided to disable a canal system near Raqqa, the strikes had to be approved by a military targeting board in what one former official called “an exhaustively detailed” process.

None of that happened with the dam, he said.

A senior Defense Department official disputed that the task force overstepped its authority by striking without informing top leaders. The official said the strikes were conducted “within approved guidance” set by the commander of the campaign against the Islamic State, General Townsend. Because of that, the official said, there was “no requirement that the commander be informed beforehand.”

First, the B-52 dropped bombs set to explode in the air above the targets to avoid damaging the structures, the senior military official said. But when those failed to dislodge the enemy fighters, the task force called for the bomber to drop three 2,000-pound bombs, including at least one bunker-buster, this time set to explode when they hit the concrete.

The task force also hit the towers with heavy artillery.

Days later, Islamic State fighters fled, sabotaging the dam’s already inoperable turbines as they retreated, according to engineers.

Satellite imagery from after the attack shows gaping holes in the roofs of both towers, a crater in the concrete of the dam next to the head-gates, and a fire in one of the power station buildings. Less obvious, but more serious, was the damage inside.

## **An Unusual Truce**

Two workers were at the dam that day. One of them, an electrical engineer, recalled Islamic State fighters positioned in the northern tower as usual that day, but no fighting underway when they went into the dam to work on the cooling system.



Hours later, a shuddering series of booms knocked them to the floor. The room filled with smoke. The engineer found his way out into the sunlight through a normally locked door that had been blown open. He froze when he saw the broad wings of an American B-52 against the clear blue sky.

Fearing that he would be mistaken for an enemy fighter, the engineer ducked back into the smoldering tower. The strikes had punched a jagged skylight through several stories. He looked up and saw fire coming from the main control room, which had been hit by the airstrike.

The dominoes of a potential disaster were now in motion. Damage to the control room caused water pumps to seize. Flooding then short-circuited electrical equipment. With no power to run crucial machinery, water couldn't pass through the dam, the reservoir crept higher. There was a crane that could raise the emergency floodgate, but it, too, had been damaged by fighting.

But the engineer knew if they could find a way to get the crane working, they might be able to open the floodgates.

He hid inside until he saw the B-52 fly away and then found a motorcycle. Though he had never driven one before, he sped as fast as he could to the house where the dam manager lived, and explained what had happened.

Engineers in Islamic State territory called their former colleagues in the Syrian government, who then contacted allies in the Russian military for help.

A few hours after the strike, a special desk phone reserved for directed communications between the United States and Russia started ringing in a busy operations center in Qatar. When a coalition officer picked up, a Russian officer on the other end warned U.S. airstrikes had caused serious damage to the dam and there was no time to waste, according to a coalition official.

Less than 24 hours after the strikes, American-backed forces, Russian and Syrian officials and the Islamic State coordinated a pause in hostilities. A team of 16 workers — some from the Islamic State, some from the Syrian government, some from American allies — drove to the site, according to the engineer, who was with the group.

They worked furiously as the water rose. The distrust and tension were so thick that at points fighters shot into the air. They succeeded in repairing the crane, which eventually allowed the floodgates to open, saving the dam.

### **Another Strike**

The U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces dismissed reports of serious damage as propaganda. A spokeswoman said the coalition had struck the dam with only ["light weapons, so as not to cause damage."](#)

A short time later, General Townsend denied the dam was a target and said, "When strikes occur on military targets, at or near the dam, we use noncratering munitions to avoid unnecessary damage to the facility."

But in the days after the strike, officers working for the coalition air war saw Islamic State images of the unexploded bunker buster and tried to figure out what had really happened, one official said. Every U.S. airstrike is supposed to be immediately reported to the operations center, but Task Force 9 had not reported the dam strikes. That made them hard to trace, said one former official who searched for the records. He said a team was only able to piece together what the task force had done by reviewing logs from the B-52.

At the air operations center, senior officials were shocked to learn how the top secret operators had bypassed safeguards and used heavy weapons, according to one of the former officials, who reviewed the operation.

No disciplinary action was taken against the task force, the officials said. The secret unit continued to strike targets using the same types of self-defense justifications it had used on the dam.

While the dam was still being repaired, the task force sent a drone over the community next to the dam. As the drone circled, three of the civilian workers who had rushed to save the dam finished their work and piled into a small van and headed back toward their homes.

More than a mile away from the dam, the van was hit by a coalition airstrike, according to workers. A mechanical engineer, a technician and a Syrian Red Crescent worker were killed. The deaths were [reported widely in Syrian media sources online](#), but because the reports got the location of the attack wrong, the U.S. military searched for strikes near the dam and [determined the allegation was “noncredible.”](#) The civilian deaths have never been officially acknowledged.

The United States continued to strike targets and its allies soon took control of the region.

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## Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	01/22 Kiribati kept Covid out now under lockdown
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/the-kiribati-island-nation-was-one-of-the-world-e2-80-99s-last-covid-free-places-now-it-e2-80-99s-under-lockdown/ar-AAT2mkk">https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/the-kiribati-island-nation-was-one-of-the-world-e2-80-99s-last-covid-free-places-now-it-e2-80-99s-under-lockdown/ar-AAT2mkk</a>
GIST	<p>The Pacific island nation of Kiribati, which had almost entirely kept the coronavirus out, went into lockdown on Saturday for the first time in the pandemic. The government imposed a 24-hour curfew after passengers on the first international flight in months tested positive for the virus.</p> <p>Before this month, the island, one of the world’s most remote, had recorded just two infections — in two people returning on a ship in May last year, who isolated on the vessel.</p> <p>The new rules include a ban on social gatherings and a requirement that residents stay home except in emergencies. Most government offices and other institutions will close, except for hospitals, the police department and essential services.</p> <p>Thirty-six people on a flight from Fiji tested positive on landing about a week ago on the first plane to arrive since the nation reopened its borders this month. All 54 passengers were isolated at a facility, but at least four cases were since reported in the community, including a security guard at the isolation center.</p> <p>American Samoa, which detected its first infection only in September, also announced a full lockdown for 48 hours starting Saturday after an uptick of 15 coronavirus cases that arrived on a flight from Australia.</p> <p>In Kiribati, the president’s office said there was “now an assumption that covid-19” was spreading in the community. “The only way that we could fight this virus is through complete vaccination,” it said. “It is critical that all work together to do our part in combating this pandemic.”</p> <p>About 90 percent of the population has received a first dose of a coronavirus vaccine, with 53 percent having had two shots, according to Radio Kiribati, citing official data. The national radio station said the Fiji flight was chartered by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.</p> <p>With a population of nearly 120,000, Kiribati lies between Australia and Hawaii, about a four-hour flight from Fiji. The nearest continent, North America, is thousands of miles away. Travelers to Kiribati must show proof of vaccination and negative test results before starting their journey to the archipelago and then quarantine for two weeks on arrival.</p>

	Many remote islands have maintained “zero covid” policies and imposed lengthy travel bans during the pandemic. The small size of Pacific island nations has in some ways helped ward off the virus, with many <a href="#">able to shut</a> their borders and some <a href="#">vaccinating their populations</a> quickly, but others lack the public health infrastructure to deal with a large outbreak.
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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 Still searching ‘Havana Syndrome’ answers</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20220122-u-s-still-searching-for-havana-syndrome-answers">https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20220122-u-s-still-searching-for-havana-syndrome-answers</a>
GIST	<p>The top U.S. spy agency has concluded a mysterious illness plaguing American diplomats and other officials around the world is not nearly as widespread as initially feared and is most likely not the work of a foreign adversary.</p> <p>But the Central Intelligence Agency also cautioned that a smaller number of cases continue to defy explanation, with one official warning that in those cases, “We have not ruled out the involvement of a foreign actor.”</p> <p>Since 2016, when it was first reported by diplomats at the U.S. Embassy in Havana, hundreds of U.S. personnel have reported getting sick, with symptoms ranging from nausea and dizziness to debilitating headaches and memory problems.</p> <p>Suspected cases of so-called Havana syndrome were reported in Russia, China, Poland and Austria, and the sickness affected some U.S. officials so badly their careers derailed.</p> <p>Yet an interim report Thursday by the CIA finds that most of the illnesses, also known as anomalous health incidents, or AHI, are not a mystery at all.</p> <p>“We assess that the majority of the reported AHI cases can be reasonably explained by medical conditions or environmental and technical factors, including previously undiagnosed illnesses,” a CIA official told VOA on Thursday on the condition of anonymity in order to discuss the report.</p> <p>The official declined to say exactly how many cases the agency investigated, describing the number as “dynamic,” and noted that reports increased dramatically once the government encouraged workers to report any symptoms that could be connected to Havana syndrome.</p> <p>Various unofficial accounts have put the number anywhere from several hundred to as many as 1,000.</p> <p><b>Unsolved Cases</b></p> <p>However, there are “a couple of dozen cases” for which there are still no answers, the official said.</p> <p>“There is a subset of cases, including some of our toughest cases, that remain unresolved,” the official said.</p> <p>The location of many of the first-reported cases — Havana, Russia and China — gave rise to speculation that Havana syndrome was not so much an illness as it was an effort to harm U.S. diplomats and intelligence personnel.</p> <p>A 2020 <a href="#">report by the National Academy of Sciences</a> further fueled such concerns, concluding that “directed, pulsed radio frequency energy appears to be the most plausible mechanism in explaining” the growing number of cases.</p> <p>The CIA interim report, while not ruling out that someone or something may be causing Havana syndrome in the unexplained cases, called the use of a weapon unlikely.</p>

“We assess that it is unlikely that a foreign adversary, including Russia, is conducting a sustained worldwide campaign harming U.S. personnel with a weapon or mechanism,” the official said. “We have so far not found evidence of state actor involvement in any incident.”

Despite the findings of the interim report, U.S. officials said Thursday that they continue to take the reports of illnesses among U.S. government employees seriously, and that making sure medical care was available remains a top priority.

“I have no higher priority as secretary than the health and safety of all of our colleagues and their families,” Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters Thursday during a news conference in Berlin. “When you talk to people, when you hear them, when you hear what they’ve been through, there is no doubt in my mind but that they have had real experiences, real symptoms, and real suffering,” he said.

“We are going to continue to do everything we can with all the resources we can bring to bear to understand, again, what happened, why, and who might be responsible. And we are leaving no stone unturned.”

CIA Director William Burns also emphasized the need to care for those who have been ill, and for any personnel that could be affected in the future, describing their suffering as real.

“While we have reached some significant interim findings, we are not done,” Burns said in a statement. “We will continue the mission to investigate these incidents and provide access to world-class care for those who need it.”

### **Lawmakers’ Response**

Some U.S. lawmakers praised the efforts of the CIA to determine the cause of the ailments but said more still needs to be done.

“Reports of anomalous health incidents among intelligence, diplomatic and military personnel emerged as early as 2016 but were not always taken seriously,” the Senate Intelligence Committee chairman, Democrat Mark Warner, said in a statement.

“I am heartened that there are now procedures in place to ensure that those who are affected by these anomalous health incidents finally have access to the world-class care that they deserve,” he said, adding, “The Senate Intelligence Committee will continue pressing for answers.”

Republican Marco Rubio, the Senate Intelligence Committee’s vice chair, was equally adamant that lawmakers would keep pressing U.S. intelligence officials for answers.

“The CIA must continue to make this issue a priority,” Rubio said, noting the possibility that the unresolved cases could still be “the work of a foreign government or a specific weapon or device.”

U.S. lawmakers, led by Warner, Rubio and Maine Republican Senator Susan Collins, passed the Helping American Victims Afflicted by Neurological Attacks Act, or HAVANA Act, last year, when it was [signed by President Joe Biden](#).

The law provides financial support for U.S. government employees suffering from symptoms attributed to Havana syndrome.

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HEADLINE	01/23 Seizure order; cruise ship changes course
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/cruise-ship-us-judge-orders-seizure-82427536">https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/cruise-ship-us-judge-orders-seizure-82427536</a>
GIST	MIAMI -- A cruise ship that was supposed to dock in Miami has instead sailed to the Bahamas, after a U.S. judge granted an order to seize the vessel as part of a lawsuit over \$4 million in unpaid fuel.  Cruise trackers show Crystal Symphony currently docked in the Bahamian island of Bimini.

“We all feel we were abducted by luxurious pirates!” passenger Stephen Heard Fales posted on Facebook.

Some passengers were taken by ferry to Port Everglades in Fort Lauderdale on Sunday. The ferry ride was apparently “uncomfortable due to inclement weather,” according to a statement from a Crystal Cruises spokesperson. The company said guests were also taken to local airports, but wouldn't comment on the lawsuit.

It was not immediately clear how many passengers were aboard, with one news outlet reporting 300 and another, 700. According to the company website, the vessel can carry up to 848 passengers.

The ship was scheduled to arrive in Miami on Saturday. But a federal judge there issued an arrest warrant for the ship Thursday, a maritime practice where a U.S. Marshal goes aboard a vessel and takes charge of it once it enters U.S. waters.

Passengers and entertainers said on social media they were surprised to find out about the legal case. One guest posted a letter on Facebook from Crystal Cruises Management that said the change in itinerary was due to “non-technical operational issues.”

Elio Pace, a musician who has toured off and on with the ship since 2013, said about about 30-50 crew disembarked because their contracts ended. Another 400 crew members don't know when they'll get off, or if they'll remain employed.

“This is a human story. This is about people and their jobs,” Pace told The Associated Press.

The lawsuit was filed in a Miami federal court by Peninsula Petroleum Far East against the ship under a maritime procedure that allows actions against vessels for unpaid debts. The complaint says Crystal Symphony was chartered or managed by Crystal Cruises and Star Cruises, which are both sued for breach of contract for allegedly owing \$4.6 million in fuel.

Crystal Cruises announced earlier this week that it was suspending operations through late April. Besides Crystal Symphony, it has two other ships currently cruising, which end their voyages on Jan. 30 in Aruba and on Feb. 4 in Argentina.

“Suspending operations will provide Crystal’s management team with an opportunity to evaluate the current state of business and examine various options moving forward,” the company said in a statement earlier this week.

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HEADLINE	01/21 Quitting not coincidence but contagious?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/business/quitting-contagious.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=Business">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/business/quitting-contagious.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=Business</a>
GIST	<p>Something infectious is spreading through the work force. Its symptoms present in a spate of two-week notices. Its transmission is visible in real time. And few bosses seem to know how to inoculate their staff against this quitagion.</p> <p>It catches quickly. “There’s a shock when you see multiple people leaving — it’s like, oh, is there something I’m not seeing?” said Tiff Cheng, 27, who left her job in digital marketing in July, along with five of her close friends at the 40-person agency. “Is it my time to leave as well?”</p> <p>Quitting rates were high in <a href="#">August</a>, <a href="#">September</a> and <a href="#">October</a>. Then, according to Labor Department data, they climbed even further: More than 4.5 million people left their jobs voluntarily in <a href="#">November</a>, a record high in two decades of tracking.</p>

Economists explained the numbers by noting that competition for workers led to better pay and benefits, driving some to seek out new opportunities. Psychologists have an additional explanation: Quitting is contagious.

When workers weigh whether to jump jobs, they don't just assess their own pay, benefits and career development. They look around and take note of how friends feel about the team culture. When one employee leaves, the departure signals to others that it might be time to take stock of their options, what researchers call "turnover contagion."

So quitting begets more quitting, a challenge that employers can't always solve with raises or perks. Even a single resignation notice can breed a "hot spot," said Will Felps, who teaches management at the University of New South Wales and was an author of [a study of turnover contagion](#).

Mr. Felps and his team studied staffing at a hospitality company and a selection of bank branches, all in the United States, and found that one worker's decision to leave is especially likely to inspire others who don't feel strongly embedded at the company. In a recent [poll](#) of more than 21,000 LinkedIn members, 59 percent said a colleague's departure had led them to consider quitting as well.

The office has long been a petri dish for infectious behavior. Lying, cheating and job satisfaction all tend to spread from desk to desk. Financial advisers, for example, are 37 percent more likely to commit misconduct if they encounter teammates who have done so, what [researchers](#) refer to as "peer effects," noting that one case of misconduct results on average in an additional 0.59 cases. Employees also [mimic](#) the nutritional patterns of people they sit with in the cafeteria. Teammates are suggestible to one another in far subtler ways than they realize.

But when it comes to heading for the exit, peer effects are particularly potent.

"When you walk by a restaurant and it's full of people, it's a clue this restaurant is pretty good," Mr. Felps said. "Similarly, when the people you know, like and respect are leaving a job, you think maybe the grass is greener somewhere else."

Ms. Cheng saw her inbox begin to fill with resignation notes last summer. Every other week she got an email from a colleague who was quitting her company, where hours were long and career advancement options seemed limited. She decided to turn full time to her own coaching business, which she now runs from Vancouver, British Columbia.

"It's always really scary to make a decision to leave your job, and it was nice to be able to see other people were doing it," Ms. Cheng said. "It didn't feel as lonely, or like I was an outsider."

A sense of workplace disaffection and restlessness started growing for many Americans in the early stages of the pandemic. For some, social media became a therapy couch, a space to vent those employment frustrations.

Back in March 2020, Erika Cruz, 31, was working at a Silicon Valley start-up, where she had grown disgruntled with the hallmarks of work life: "meetings that could have been an email" and lack of control over her schedule.

She got the motivation she needed to leave that summer when she watched a friend she had met on Instagram ditch a cushy tech job to open a coaching firm. Then Ms. Cruz, who had about six months of living expenses saved up, moved back to her parents' home in the Bay Area and put in her one month's notice at work. She sought advice from social media about how to start a business. Ms. Cruz realized, though, that there was no one-size-fits-all approach to upending a career.

"If you Google banana breads, there's over a million recipes online, and they're all going to be good but they're all slightly different," she said. "You have to choose your own recipe."

It's the story of the pandemic: When people posted their banana bread photos, they influenced their friends to start baking as well. But like quitting, it was something no two people did the same way.

The friend who inspired Ms. Cruz's resignation, Cat Del Carmen, 34, agreed that it was important to develop her own quitting strategy. Ms. Del Carmen was able to leave a job at Adobe by cutting back spending on restaurant meals, vacations and TJ Maxx splurges. The six months after she left her job were high pressure financially. Ms. Del Carmen drew comfort from her correspondence with friends on social media who were also navigating the post-paycheck territory.

That bond forged by resignation, as people look to one another for inspiration and affirmation, is a phenomenon that predates the pandemic.

"It's a huge decision," said Anthony Klotz, an organizational psychologist at Texas A&M University. "If you Google how to resign from your job, there's lots of conflicting guidance. Those answers are not in a company handbook. It makes sense people reach out for sounding boards from trusted others."

Aimee Wells, 53, who works in public relations, had her own quitagion experience years ago. She had been working at a global marketing firm in San Francisco, where she bristled at the time constraints of corporate life. She was never able to drop off her son at kindergarten. She remembered watching the 1996 movie "One Fine Day," in which Michelle Pfeiffer plays an architect who decides to make her family a priority over high-powered work. It left Ms. Wells grappling with how to reset the balance between her own corporate job and personal life (far as it was from the realities of Ms. Pfeiffer and George Clooney's).

One evening, on the train coming home from work at 6, she ran into a neighbor carrying shopping bags full of files, office supplies and photographs. The neighbor told Ms. Wells that she had just quit the role that was burning her out.

"I went home and starting thinking about it a lot more seriously," Ms. Wells said. One month later, she put in her own resignation notice, catalyzed by the run-in with her neighbor. "She was like my hero."

The payoffs for some pandemic quitters have been significant. Nikissa Granados, 26, was weighing whether to leave her job at an Orange County, Calif., school in 2020 to do freelance social media marketing. She made the leap after seeing two of her teammates resign.

Ms. Granados went from making \$2,100 a month, spending days on her feet setting up cots for nap time and begging children to wear their masks, to making as much as \$8,000 monthly while dictating her own schedule, she said. She realized something now viscerally clear to many child care providers: In her work at the school, the mismatch between strain and pay had been stark.

For employers, replacing just one quitter is a straightforward task. But replacing several, or even dozens, is far more challenging, and the interim period tends to leave existing staff with a heavier load, while recruiters field awkward questions about what's fueling all the departures. With quitting rates soaring, some executives are wondering how to lift morale.

Seth Besmertnik, chief executive of the marketing software company Conductor, had seen his company's turnover rates hover in the low single digits for years. He even worried that his retention was too strong, making it hard to scout new talent.

Over the last two years, though, turnover rose into the double digits. Mr. Besmertnik had to get creative in his tactics to keep workers content, including adding new holidays and bringing Broadway actors from "Hamilton" and "Dear Evan Hansen" to sing "Burn" and "Waving Through a Window" (respectively) for staff during all-company video meetings.

Career coaches, meanwhile, worry that some people are being too easily influenced by the behaviors of their roaming colleagues. Kathryn Minshew, chief executive of the Muse, a job search site, warns clients



	<p>that a single employee’s desire to leave a company shouldn’t have too much bearing on the decisions that friends make.</p> <p>“When one person announces their resignation, there are usually some questions from their colleagues and workplace friends,” she said. “‘Where are you going? Why are you leaving?’”</p> <p>That Pied Piper trail won’t always lead people to better options, and Ms. Minshew advises workers to assess their companies with the hyper-individualized approach they might take to building relationships.</p> <p>“The idea that somebody would publish a list of the 50 best people to marry in New York City is silly,” she continued. “Similarly, I think the best companies to work for is a bit of a silly idea.”</p> <p>But logical career advice can’t always prevent the contagion from catching.</p> <p>“There’s a little bit of a ‘take this job and shove it’ feeling,” Ms. Wells said. “If you’re in a company where people all start leaving, you’re like, ‘Why am I the last one sitting here?’”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Search-rescue hot spots WA national parks</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/life/outdoors/2-national-parks-in-washington-among-u-s-most-dangerous/">https://www.seattletimes.com/life/outdoors/2-national-parks-in-washington-among-u-s-most-dangerous/</a>
GIST	<p>The alluring Mount Rainier and Olympic national parks draw people from around the world. But both appear to be among the nation’s most dangerous parks, according to new <a href="#">analysis</a> by online outdoor research guide Outforia.</p> <p>The analysis of search-and-rescue incidents between 2018 and 2020 shows that Olympic had the ninth highest number of search-and-rescue incidents in America. Mount Rainier came in at No. 13. Grand Canyon National Park had the highest number of search-and-rescue operations nationwide over the three-year period, recording 785 incidents.</p> <p>In those three years, Olympic National Park had 204 search-and-rescue incidents, according to the 2021 analysis.</p> <p>Mount Rainier National Park rangers, meanwhile, tallied 60 search-and-rescue operations in 2020, the most in the past five years, according to park data.</p> <p>Nationwide, Washington had the seventh most search-and-rescue incidents over the three-year span, with 465 incidents around the state, the analysis found.</p> <p>National Park rangers have said that the pandemic that forced so many inside for months has brought many newer hikers, skiers and snowshoers, but many have found themselves challenged by weather conditions and inexperience.</p> <p>In 2020, <a href="#">there were 237 million visits to the country’s more than 400 national parks</a>, according to the National Park Service. About 2 million people visit Mount Rainier each year. In 2021, the park had 2,477,816 visitors. Visitors to <a href="#">Olympic National Park in 2020 were estimated at 2.5 million</a>, down from 3.25 million in 2019.</p> <p>According to Outforia, there were 146 search-and-rescue incidents reported at Mount Rainier National Park during the three years looked at. Of those, 101 are still open, accounting for 69% of total incidents in the park.</p> <p>With elevations up to 14,000 feet and an area of 369.3 square miles, it’s not hard to imagine how a person — experienced or not — could find themselves in trouble at Mount Rainier.</p>

	<p>However, Outforia noted that in some cases, search-and-rescue operations can go on for a number of months. Sometimes, a missing person may not be involved, but an incident is being investigated, leading to a higher number of cases remaining open, Outforia said.</p> <p>One ranger with North Cascades National Park also cautioned that search-and-rescue statistics can be misleading.</p> <p>For one thing, said North Cascades District Ranger Gabe Asarian, it's not uncommon to get reports of missing hikers that may be logged as incidents but are never followed up on because the hikers show up quickly.</p> <p>"We get calls every single weekend about missing hikers and most do not end up as searches," he said.</p> <p>Asarian said he did not know the numbers for Mount Rainier, but said the number of open cases there could be the result of a quirk in the system or could be due to hikers being found and the case never officially being closed.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Closing diversity gap in outdoor recreation</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/yes-black-people-do-hike-overcoming-diversity-gap-outdoor-recreation/EIXXIRRZ4REMHFRQA7UWYO2Y4M/">https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/yes-black-people-do-hike-overcoming-diversity-gap-outdoor-recreation/EIXXIRRZ4REMHFRQA7UWYO2Y4M/</a>
GIST	<p>A big draw of the Pacific Northwest for many is the unparalleled natural beauty available here. But research shows people of color are much less likely to enjoy nature through outdoor recreation.</p> <p>Segregation historically extended to the outdoors, but groups in Western Washington are working to repair the divide.</p> <p>"It's not too many faces, people of color out there," said Joseph Mitchell, a lead organizer with the Facebook group, "<a href="#">Black People Hike</a>."</p> <p>Mitchell, an Everett resident, is from Chicago. If you run into him on the trail, his Bears-themed walking stick will be hard to miss.</p> <p>He discovered hiking nine years ago after being encouraged to go with some friends to Rattlesnake Ledge — the first hike for many newcomers to the area.</p> <p>"The perspective and the view is something where coming from the Midwest," Mitchell said, "It was something I'd never experienced before. So yeah, it was life-changing. First hike was definitely life-changing," he said.</p> <p>Mitchell says he fell in love with being outside. And when he came across the Seattle-founded Facebook group called "Black People Hike," he says he was all in.</p> <p>"Something just clicked in my brain. I just had developed an instant passion to want to expose others to these outdoor experiences," Mitchell said.</p> <p>Researchers from all over the world have <a href="#">published studies</a> that show nature is very, very good for us. Of course, there are the physical benefits, but studies show exposure to nature also brings mental health benefits like <a href="#">lower stress levels</a> and anxiety. Then there are things you might not expect, like improved attention span and even <a href="#">greater empathy</a>.</p> <p><a href="#">Kathleen Wolf</a> is a social scientist at the University of Washington's School of Environmental and Forest Sciences.</p>

“Simply seeing nature can reduce stress in a matter of minutes. A physiological response so people might not actually be aware of it when it happens,” Wolf said.

But for many reasons, fewer Black people are accessing that benefit.

The most recent [survey data from the U.S. Forest Service](#) found that between 2014 and 2018, 95% of visitors to national forests were white. Black, or African Americans, were the most underrepresented, at 1.2%.

A [National Parks Survey](#) showed slightly more diversity, with African American visitors accounting for 6% of visitors in 2018, compared to 13% of the overall population.

One big influence on the disparity is historical discrimination. Many national parks in the south were segregated, like [Shenandoah National Park](#).

Today, Black people enjoying nature still face racism.

There was [the viral incident in 2020](#) when a white woman in Central Park called the police on a Black bird-watcher who asked her to leash her dogs.

Jourdan Keith, a Seattle resident, is the founder and director of the [Urban Wilderness Project](#), a group that works for justice “at the intersection of gender, ethnicity and environment.”

“After that ridiculous event, that horrifying event with the birders. People have been looking for birds for a long time but we had to declare, we’re Black birders,” Keith said.

Colorado-based Instagrammer “fatblackandgettinit” posted a video describing his hiking experience.

“You may have seen me on your favorite trail. People always clutch their purses or their kids when I walk past them,” he says with a smile.

One big way the Urban Wilderness Project serves its mission is by bringing young people out into nature to discover the joy of the outdoors.

“We’re focused on African American, Latino, Asian, and Native youth, LGBTQ youth who might feel otherwise not welcome,” Keith said.

Keith recalled one snowshoeing trip with an entire class of eighth-graders at Mount Rainier.

“One of the girls got off the bus when we got back to the parking lot and she said to me, ‘Wow, I never knew I liked nature.’ It’s like my job is done! How would she have known if she didn’t go?” Keith said.

Urban Wilderness Project, Black People Hike, and now an increasing number of groups are working on making the outdoors more accessible.

“I’ll tell someone, I’m going on a hike this weekend. And one of the responses is, Black people hike? And it’s like yes, Black people do hike. We actually do hike,” Mitchell said.

“Black People Hike” helps provide gear like hiking poles, backpacks, and shoes for new hikers by partnering with the Washington Trails Association’s (WTA) [gear library](#). They also organize group hikes almost weekly.

“They’re intimidated about going, showing up by themselves, not knowing where to go, or just being alone,” Mitchell said.

	<p>“This wilderness solitude thing seems very much to be a White Western European sort of preference. And that’s not shared by all cultures,” Wolf said.</p> <p>“It’s a hard feeling to put into words but I just feel good helping other people,” Mitchell said.</p> <p>Wolf adds you might not need to travel as far into the woods as you’d expect to reap the benefits of the outdoors. Rather, it can be <a href="#">discovered in “near nature,”</a> as Wolf calls it.</p> <p>“You don’t have to go away for days at a time, out to the mountains far away,” Wolf said. “Ten, 20, 30 minutes outdoors in a place that you feel safe within of course. A nearby nature encounter, can be your streetscape, our own yard, a nearby park — all of that can be very helpful,” she said.</p> <p>Wolf said research shows what’s key is being mindful of your surroundings, instead of being distracted by something like your device.</p> <p>“Being intentional of what’s around us,” Wolf said. “It’s a process of mindfulness and immersion in that nature setting. Coming to recognize what’s around you using all of their senses,” she said.</p>
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## Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	01/23 L.A.-area ‘ambush’ party shooting: 4 dead
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.foxnews.com/us/los-angeles-area-ambush-shooting-house-party-inglewood">https://www.foxnews.com/us/los-angeles-area-ambush-shooting-house-party-inglewood</a>
GIST	<p>A <a href="#">Los Angeles</a> area <a href="#">shooting</a> at a house party early Sunday left four people dead and another injured, according to local reports and city officials.</p> <p>The shooting took place in Inglewood, a city of about 100,000 people 10 miles southwest of downtown Los Angeles, around 1:30 a.m.</p> <p>Three people were pronounced dead at the scene, FOX 11 reported. Paramedics rushed two others to the hospital. One of them is expected to survive, and the other died en route to the hospital, according to CBS2.</p> <p>The victims who died were reportedly two females and two males.</p> <p>Speaking to reporters later Sunday morning, Inglewood Mayor James Butts described the shooting as an "ambush" involving multiple shooters firing multiple weapons including a rifle and a handgun. The mayor said it was the largest number of single shooting victims in Inglewood since the 1990s.</p> <p>"These are sociopathic killers that have to be sequestered from society," Butts said of the shooters. "Turn yourselves in. We will find you, and we will prosecute you."</p> <p>Police haven't released a potential motive or said if any of the victims were targeted. Officers interviewed witnesses and canvassed the neighborhood looking for possible security camera footage.</p> <p>Fox News has reached out to the Inglewood Police Department and Los Angeles County Fire Department seeking further information but did not hear back before publication.</p> <p>The man who survived allegedly admitted to being a member of a street gang in another city and investigators are trying to determine if the shooting was gang-related, CBS2 reported.</p> <p>Inglewood is home to SoFi Stadium, where the Super Bowl will be played next month.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/24 Assange granted appeal to UK high court</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/assange-granted-appeal-uk-fight-extradition-us-82436006">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/assange-granted-appeal-uk-fight-extradition-us-82436006</a>
GIST	<p>LONDON -- WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's battle to avoid extradition to the U.S. will go to Britain's Supreme Court after he was granted the right Monday to appeal a lower court ruling.</p> <p>The High Court in London allowed Assange to appeal its decision that he could be sent to the U.S to stand trial on espionage charges.</p> <p>The decision is the latest step in Assange's long battle to avoid trial on a series of charges related to WikiLeaks' publication of classified documents more than a decade ago.</p> <p>Just over a year ago, a district court judge in London rejected a U.S. extradition request on the grounds that Assange was likely to kill himself if held under harsh U.S. prison conditions. U.S. authorities later provided assurances that the WikiLeaks founder wouldn't face the severe treatment his lawyers said would put his physical and mental health at risk.</p> <p>The High Court last month overturned the lower court's decision, saying that the U.S. promises were enough to guarantee Assange would be treated humanely.</p> <p>The court on Monday gave Assange permission to appeal that ruling to the Supreme Court.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 Suspect live-tweeted hostage taking</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://mynorthwest.com/3322117/rantz-seattle-man-live-tweeted-hostage-taking-he-keeps-getting-out-of-jail/">https://mynorthwest.com/3322117/rantz-seattle-man-live-tweeted-hostage-taking-he-keeps-getting-out-of-jail/</a>
GIST	<p>A man who says he suffers from mental illness keeps cycling through the King County criminal justice system. He has a long history of suicide-by-cop attempts. Someone is bound to get hurt or worse if the man is not kept in jail.</p> <p>The suspect is accused of trying to take hostages at a Target in West Seattle, where he barricaded himself for hours. He allegedly posted videos of himself from inside the store after threatening would-be hostages with a knife. It's not the first time he's been accused of trying to hold shoppers hostage at a department store.</p> <p>The suspect was arrested and charged with assaulting a Seattle Police officer just eight days prior. But a judge released the suspect on his own personal recognizance despite the prosecutor's plea for bail. It set the stage for the suspect to take over the Target.</p> <p><b>The suspect tried to take hostages</b></p> <p>At roughly 4:43 pm on January 21, the suspect called 911 to say he was going to "take 1 hostage at knife point," according to police documents. He was apparently "fixated" on the idea and stayed on with the 911 operator throughout the entire alleged incident.</p> <p>The caller refused to tell the operator where he was headed because, according to the police document detailing the call, "he'll just be sent back to the hospital &amp; the hospital won't assist &amp; and will just release him." He acknowledged his "need for mental health services."</p> <p>He took a bus from an unknown location, telling the bus driver that he is homeless. He ended up at a Target in West Seattle. His "plan" was to get a kitchen knife and "take hostages to be on national news."</p> <p>Once at the store, he allegedly asked an employee "where knives are" before grabbing one and unwrapping it. Police documents say he threatened a female customer as a witness was "yelling to get out of the building." As they left, the suspect allegedly yelled, "stop I'm holding you hostage" and "if I can't get the help I need, I'm holding you hostage."</p>

The suspect allegedly approached random customers to tell them they were hostages. He wanted officers to kill him, the police document says, and was “planning to run at police with [the] knife.”

As customers evacuated the Target, police arrived at approximately 5:45 pm.

### **The suspect live-tweeted the crime**

A hostage negotiator team arrived on the scene and connected with the suspect over the phone. The suspect was inside the Target for more than six hours.

As police tried to de-escalate, the suspect told them he was “actively posting updates on his twitter account while inside the store.”

A Twitter account attached to the suspect’s name posted two videos and two photos from inside the store. It also included commentary and a link to a local blog that was covering the incident.

*“Thanks to gun control and being poor no gun to take hostages with and 29+ ppl I tried to take hostage ran like mad,” he tweeted at 8:03 pm.*

Several minutes earlier, he said he “Peed twice on floor of target I took over.” He joked that they won’t likely hire him once he’s out of jail.

In the posted videos, the suspect rambles with run-on sentences as he faces the cell phone camera and walks around the store.

*“Well, this court case is going to be funny. No, I’m not representing myself,” he said on one video posted at 7:58 pm. “Yeah, I cannot do... I cannot represent myself for \*\*\*\*. I got super lucky that the prosecutor’s office... this bull\*\*\*\* charges on me on that one. See my face is all messed up because I don’t have, I don’t have money for \*\*\*\* man. So yeah, this will be fun for...”*

The video cuts off. But at 10:01 pm, a second video is posted.

*“So this is a very unique barricade situation that I’ve created,” he says. “So what happened is, I didn’t have access to guns because of being a felon, not having money and connections to buy off the street, would not be able to assemble a ghost gun if I had the money to purchase the components and in the 3d printer and whatever. So this is, so we have in the criminal element, there’s no way even that comes even close to the understanding, a tactical and negotiation and having worked for a law enforcement agency. This is a very unique...”*

Again, the video cuts off.

### **SWAT goes in**

The de-escalation was deemed unsuccessful and SWAT arrived on the scene. With permission from the store manager, SWAT entered the building.

At 12:05 am, the suspect tweeted that “SWAT just arrived big time!!!” And then 12:15 am, the suspect posted a blurry photo of SWAT as they approached him inside the Target.

*“.@SeattlePD swat face with face,” he tweeted.*

Six minutes later, he posted another photo of the SWAT members, but without accompanying text.

By 12:26 am, SWAT made an arrest. He was booked in King County Jail.

As of January 22, SPD had not yet referred the case to the King County Prosecutor’s Office. Prosecutors presented a first-appearance document to the judge and argued there was probable cause for first-degree burglary. A judge agreed with the assessment, but bail has not yet been addressed.

### **Suspect attempted hostage situation at Fred Meyer in 2021**

The suspect attempted the same type of hostage situation in 2021 at a Fred Meyer in Burien.

On August 18, 2021, the suspect armed himself with a pair of scissors and said he was looking for the kitchen area of the store. Once he found the knives, he armed himself with one. According to a police document, he explained his "intention was to take hostages at the store." He requested that SWAT and Crisis Negotiators respond to the scene.

"He claimed to have taken his mother hostage recently, but was now taking Fred Meyer hostage because he 'could not get the help he needed.'"

As the store was being evacuated, the suspect negotiated with officers. Finally, he was taken into custody with no injuries and charged with felony harassment. But the prosecutor dismissed the charge and it appeared to have been downgraded to a misdemeanor, according to the Prosecutor's Office.

Police said that the suspect "is known to law enforcement, as there have been multiple incidents with him in the past."

### **Suspect pulled a knife at different Target in 2020**

In January of 2020, the suspect attempted a similar stunt at a Target in Downtown Seattle.

After attending a mental health appointment, prosecutors said he entered the department store, stole a 10-inch kitchen knife, and started yelling that he wanted to commit a "suicide by cop." A security officer attempted to calm him down, but the suspect threatened the officer with a knife and stole his phone to call 911 and report his crime-in-progress.

SPD arrived and convinced the suspect to drop his knife.

"The defendant's current and past actions demonstrate that he is engaging in a pattern of escalating violent behavior that is putting his safety, the safety of law enforcement officers, and the safety of those around him in danger," the prosecutor wrote.

A judge found the suspect guilty of felony harassment but was only sentenced to three months in jail.

### **Long history of suicide-by-cop attempts**

Seattle and King County law enforcement know the suspect all too well. He's a one-time civilian employee of the Seattle Police Department, a job he received in an apparent effort to stop him from filing laborious and frivolous public disclosure requests.

He has a very long criminal record and has previously attempted a suicide-by-cop.

Between July 2018 and January 2019, prosecutors say the suspect had at least ten instances of suicide-by-cop. On January 23, 2019, he was charged with assaulting five officers during an 11th suicide-by-cop attempt.

Prosecutors alleged the suspect "showed up to a police station with an airsoft gun that had been modified to look like an operable handgun and attempted to commit suicide by police through pointing the gun at five police officers while yelling and shaking." Cops knew to expect him: the suspect called 911 prior to the incident to explain what he was attempting.

Most recently, the suspect was charged with assaulting a police officer. A judge released the suspect on his own personal recognizance over the prosecutor's objection. Earlier in the day, the suspect was subject to a "city wide safety warning" stating he "planned on forcing an officer to kill him," according to a police document obtained by the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH.



	<p><b>System failure is putting the public at risk</b></p> <p>The suspect has been in and out of mental health care treatment according to a police source familiar with the suspect.</p> <p>Law enforcement even has a “Crisis Response Plan” for the suspect to help keep officers safe. It says in 2021, that he “spoke about looking into how to make bombs and wanting to blow up Swedish [Hospital] – FBI &amp; Swedish notified.”</p> <p>It recommends arrest if probable cause exists, and trespassing the suspect when appropriate. Officers are given de-escalation techniques to use and warned of his past incidents.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Milwaukee: multiple homicides; 5 dead</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/horrific-5-homicide-victims-discovered-at-milwaukee-home/">https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/horrific-5-homicide-victims-discovered-at-milwaukee-home/</a>
GIST	<p>MILWAUKEE (AP) — Five people were found dead in a Milwaukee home Sunday in what police are investigating as multiple homicides, according to the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner’s office.</p> <p>Milwaukee Police responded about 3:45 p.m. Sunday to assist with a welfare check at the residence where four men and one woman were found dead, Milwaukee Assistant Police Chief Paul Formolo said during a Sunday evening news conference. The victims’ identities are pending.</p> <p>“Citizens of our community had concerns with the occupants that resided there,” Formolo said. “It’s a normal call for us to respond to. We do it all the time.”</p> <p>The motive and information regarding any suspects was not immediately known, Formolo said. He said there is no information to suggest that there is a threat to the community.</p> <p>“The murders discovered today on a residential block in the heart of our city are horrific,” Acting Milwaukee Mayor Cavalier Johnson said in a statement Sunday night. “First, I offer my condolences to the families and friends of the victims. Whatever the circumstances, we must share the grief of those who have lost loved ones.”</p> <p>Autopsies will be performed Monday, the medical examiner’s office said.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 Seattle shopping center standoff ends</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/standoff-ends-shopping-center-west-seattle-friday/QL4IPYFVJZHHZKKQ6MFUQ7DT2Q/">https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/standoff-ends-shopping-center-west-seattle-friday/QL4IPYFVJZHHZKKQ6MFUQ7DT2Q/</a>
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Police were in a standoff with a person in crisis at the Target in Westwood Village in West Seattle for nearly 7 hours Friday night, according to Seattle Police.</p> <p>Officers arrived at the scene around 5:30 p.m. and were able to work with Target employees to safely evacuate people from the store.</p> <p>SWAT also responded to the scene.</p> <p>The man was taken into custody around 12:30 a.m. Saturday and was taken to Harborview Medical Center.</p> <p>He is reportedly someone police have had contact with before in similar incidents.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 Threats to US Jewish community</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20220122-threats-to-the-u-s-jewish-community-the-facts">https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20220122-threats-to-the-u-s-jewish-community-the-facts</a>

Here are six facts about threats to the Jewish community in the United States.

**1. Jews are consistently the most targeted religious community in the U.S.**

According to the FBI's annual data on [hate crimes](#), defined as criminal offenses which are motivated by bias, crimes targeting the Jewish community consistently constitute over half of all religion-based crimes. [The number of hate crimes](#) against Jews has ranged between 600 and 1,200 each year since the FBI began collecting data in the 1990s. There were 683 hate crimes against Jews in 2020, 963 in 2019 and 847 in 2018.

The FBI's data is based on voluntary reporting by local law enforcement. For a variety of reasons, dozens of large cities either underreport or do not report hate crime data at all.

**2. Antisemitic incidents are being reported at record levels**

ADL's annual [Audit of Antisemitic Incidents](#), which tracks incidents of antisemitic harassment, vandalism and assault in the U.S., also illustrates the danger facing American Jews. In 2020, ADL tabulated 2,024 reported antisemitic incidents throughout the country. While this was a four percent decrease from the 2,107 incidents recorded in 2019, it was still the third-highest year on record since ADL began tracking antisemitic incidents in 1979.

Of the 2,024 incidents recorded in 2020, 1,242 were cases of harassment, a 10% increase from 1,127 in 2019, and 751 incidents were cases of vandalism, an 18% decrease from 919 in 2019. The 31 incidents of antisemitic assault (a 49% decrease from 61 in 2019), involved 41 victims and no fatalities. Of the physical assaults against Jewish individuals, the vast majority were perpetrated without the use of a deadly weapon.

**3. Jewish institutions are vulnerable targets**

In 2020, there were 327 reported antisemitic incidents at Jewish institutions such as synagogues, Jewish community centers and Jewish schools, an increase of 40% from 234 in 2019. Two hundred and sixty-four (264) were incidents of harassment, 61 were incidents of vandalism and three were incidents of assault. Of the 264 incidents of harassment, 114 were "[Zoombombings](#)."

Thirty-four of these incidents were perpetrated by extremists. Almost all of them were harassment, including white supremacist flouting incidents or anti-Israel extremist protests. One was an act of vandalism.

**4. Jews are regularly targeted because of their actual or perceived support for Israel and Zionism**

From 2018 to 2020, between seven and nine percent of antisemitic incidents reported to ADL have explicitly incorporated anti-Israel or anti-Zionist elements. This includes Jewish people being told they should "go back to Israel," synagogues being vandalized with pro-Palestinian graffiti, the distribution of flyers blaming Israel for perpetrating the 9/11 terrorist attacks, or Jewish students being harassed or excluded from student life because of their real or assumed connections to Israel. In January 2022 an individual [was arrested](#) by detectives with the New York Police Department Hate Crimes Task Force for using antisemitic slurs while physically assaulting a Jewish man who refused his demands to remove a sweatshirt with the logo of the Israel Defense Forces.

Antisemitic incidents in the U.S. [more than doubled](#) during and immediately after the May 2021 military conflict between Israel and Hamas compared to the same time period in 2020. Assaults saw the most dramatic year-over-year increase, rising from zero between May 11-31, 2020, to 11 in the same period in May 2021. There is evidence that at least seven of the antisemitic assaults were motivated by anger over the conflict in the Middle East.

**5. Extremists and antisemites perpetrate deadly violence against Jews**

Since 2016, individuals with connections to extremist/antisemitic groups or ideologies perpetrated at least six deadly attacks on Jews:

- **El Paso, Texas, November 2020:** Antisemite Joseph Angel Alvarez allegedly murdered attorney Georgette Kaufman and wounded her husband. According to police, Alvarez said he was “executing and exterminating the pro-choice Jewish Satan worshippers.”
- **Monsey, New York, December 2019:** Five people were injured, including one who later died of his injuries, when Grafton Thomas attacked a Hanukkah party at the home of a rabbi in Monsey, New York with a machete. Federal prosecutors filed hate crime charges against Thomas after discovering evidence of antisemitic ideologies in his journal and search history, [including searches](#) for “why did Hitler hate the Jews,” “German Jewish Temples near me,” and “Zionist temples.” Thomas has since been declared unfit to stand trial and was ordered committed to a psychiatric facility for continued evaluation.
- **Jersey City, New Jersey, December 10, 2019:** David Anderson and Francine Graham shot and killed a police officer at a cemetery before driving to a kosher market and killing three more people. Anderson and Graham were killed during the subsequent standoff and shootout. One civilian and two police officers were also shot but survived. Both Anderson and Graham had expressed Black Hebrew Israelite and antisemitic views in the past. A note reportedly found in their vehicle read, “I do this because my creator makes me do this, and I hate who he hates.” As of the publication of this report, police are also investigating whether the two may also have been involved in a previous killing as well.
- **Poway, California, April 2019:** White supremacist John T. Earnest opened fire at a synagogue in Poway, California, killing one person and injuring three before fleeing. He was reportedly emulating white supremacist Brenton Tarrant’s killing spree in New Zealand in March 2019. In December 2021 he was sentenced to life plus thirty years in prison.
- **Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, October 27, 2018.** White supremacist Robert Bowers murdered 11 people and injured seven more, including four police officers, during services at the Tree of Life Synagogue. Bowers was a virulent antisemite who, among other things, blamed Jews for orchestrating the immigration of non-whites into the United States.
- **Orange County, California, January 2, 2018.** White supremacist Samuel Woodward, a member of the neo-Nazi group Atomwaffen, was arrested for killing Blaze Bernstein, a former high school acquaintance. Woodward allegedly stabbed Bernstein 20 times in the face and neck before burying him in a shallow grave. Woodward was charged with first-degree murder with a hate crime enhancement (Bernstein was Jewish and gay).

#### **6. Jews have been the targets of at least 21 extremist plots or credible threats since 2016**

- **January 2022, Colleyville, Texas:** A gunman entered Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas, during services, and took three congregants and a rabbi as hostages. The attacker reportedly demanded the release of [Aafia Siddiqui](#), who is serving an 86-year prison sentence at the Federal Medical Center (FMC) Carswell in Fort Worth, Texas. The standoff ended more than ten hours later with all hostages released, apparently unharmed, and the alleged perpetrator, identified as 44-year-old British national Malik Faisal Akram, dead.
- **April 2020, Assumption, Illinois:** Federal agents charged white supremacist Randall Burrus with weapons offenses in connection with [an alleged plot to attack a synagogue](#).
- **April 2020, East Longmeadow, Massachusetts:** Federal agents arrested white supremacist John Michael Rathbun for [allegedly attempting to burn down a Jewish assisted living facility](#). In June 2021, Rathbun [was convicted](#) on two federal counts related to the plot.
- **March 2020, Belton, Missouri:** White supremacist Timothy Wilson was killed in a shootout with the FBI as they attempted to arrest him for [plotting to blow up a hospital](#) housing Covid-19 patients in the Kansas City area. Wilson reportedly discussed other possible targets, including a school with a large African-American student population, a synagogue and a mosque.

- **November 2019, Pueblo, Colorado:** Federal authorities arrested Neo-Nazi and white supremacist Richard Holzer on charges related to [an alleged plot to blow up a synagogue](#). In February 2021, [Holzer pleaded guilty and was sentenced](#) to over 19 years in prison, followed by 15 years of supervised release. [Holzer admitted](#) he planned the bombing and that it was “a move for our race” in preparation for a racial holy war.
- **September 2019, Racine, Wisconsin:** Yousef O. Barasneh, a member of the neo-Nazi group, The Base, allegedly vandalized the Beth Israel Sinai Congregation with antisemitic graffiti, as part of a multi-state plot against Jews dubbed “Operation Kristallnacht” by the white supremacist conspirators. Barasneh was later apprehended and pleaded guilty to criminal charges related to the plot, as did Richard Tobin, who allegedly orchestrated it. Tobin was 19 at the time.”
- **August 2019, Youngstown, Ohio:** James Reardon Jr., a white nationalist, was arrested for threatening a Jewish community center on Instagram. A video posted on July 11, 2019, tagged the Youngstown center and shows a man who appears to be Reardon firing a semi-automatic rifle. When he was taken into custody, he had an arsenal of firearms and combat gear in his home. Reardon [pleaded guilty](#) to charges of menacing and harassing in May 2021 and was [sentenced](#) in September 2021 to 41 months in prison.
- **August 2019, Las Vegas, Nevada:** White supremacist Conor Climo was arrested on a federal weapons charge in connection with a [plot to attack several local targets](#), including a Messianic church, an ADL office, and an LGBTQ-friendly bar. Climo [pleaded guilty](#) in February 2020 to one count of possession of an unregistered firearm. He admitted that he was communicating with individuals who identified themselves as members of the neo-Nazi group [Feuerkrieg Division](#) and that he had discussed plans to set fire to a synagogue. Climo [was sentenced](#) to two years in prison in November 2020.
- **June 2019, Harlingen, Texas:** Harlingen, Texas, police arrested Joel Hayden Schrimsher for planning to mail a bomb to the Federal Reserve, set fire to a mosque and set fire to and shoot up a synagogue. In addition to explosive materials, police also reportedly found white supremacist literature in his house. Schrimsher [was sentenced](#) to eight years in state prison on January 2021.
- **June 2019, Concord, California:** White supremacist [Ross Farca](#) was arrested on charges of making criminal threats and manufacturing and possessing an illegal assault weapon after claiming online that he wanted to imitate alleged Poway shooter John Earnest. On December 1, 2021, a jury found Farca guilty on five counts including weapons and hate crime charges. (edited)
- **May 2019, Carmel, Indiana:** White supremacist Nolan Brewer plotted to burn down a synagogue in Carmel, Indiana. However, upon arrival he was deterred by its security cameras and committed an act of vandalism instead. He pleaded guilty to a federal hate crime and received a three-year sentence
- **May 2019, Kent, Washington:** Federal authorities arrested white supremacist Chase Bliss Colasurdo of Kent, Washington and charged him with making violent threats against President Trump’s family and media figures, as well as ongoing bomb threats to synagogues. Colasurdo’s posts included images and statements promoting antisemitic conspiracy theories and advocating for the murder of Jews, including Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein, who survived the April 2019 shooting attack at the Chabad Congregation in Poway, California. On October 2019, Colasurdo [pleaded guilty](#) and was sentenced to five years in prison and three years of supervised release for two counts of interstate threats.
- **May 2019, Basking Ridge, New Jersey:** Islamist extremist Jonathan Xie was arrested for attempting to provide material support to Hamas and threatening to shoot pro-Israel supporters, as well as bomb the Israeli consulate and Trump Tower in New York City. In September 2020, Xie [pleaded guilty](#) and admitted he concealed his attempts to provide support Hamas.
- **April 2019, Ocean City, Maryland:** Corbin Kauffman (aka CK Shekels) of Lehigh, Pennsylvania, was [charged](#) with interstate transmission of threats to injure. Kauffman “expressed a desire to commit genocide and ‘hate crimes,’ and called for or depicted images of killing of Jewish people, black people and Muslim people.” Kauffman also plastered a display case at Chabad Jewish Center in Ocean City,

Maryland with white supremacist and antisemitic stickers; allegedly spray-painted antisemitic graffiti at a park; and posted photos of the vandalism online. He was [sentenced](#) to 18 months in prison in July 2021.

- **February 2019, Silver Spring, Maryland:** Coast Guard lieutenant Christopher Paul Hasson, a white supremacist, was arrested by federal authorities on weapon and drug charges in connection with an alleged terrorist plot to attack politicians and media figures. Hasson's list of targets included Jewish leaders. Hasson was [sentenced](#) to more than 13 years in prison in January 2020. He [filed](#) an appeal in March 2021.

- **December 2018, Lake Forest Park, Washington:** White supremacist Dakota Reed was [arrested](#) for allegedly making threats to carry out mass killings of Jews and other minorities. Authorities began to investigate Reed in late October, after the ADL Center on Extremism warned law enforcement about Reed's violent threats to attack synagogues. Reed made numerous online posts under a variety of pseudonyms, including a call to "take back your future one synagogue at a time" and an announcement that he would "make the news some more and shoot some Jews in 2025." In other social media posts, he could be seen posing with semi-automatic rifles and making explicit threats about murdering Jewish people.

- **December 2018, Toledo, Ohio:** Damon Joseph was [arrested](#) for attempting to provide material support to ISIS and plotting to attack a synagogue in the Toledo area. Joseph expressed admiration for Robert Bowers, the Pittsburgh Tree of Life shooter, claiming he admired "what the guy did with the shooting" and that he could see himself "carrying out this type of operations inshallah." He expressed virulent hatred for Jews and researched when the Jewish sabbath was so that more people would be present at the synagogue when he attacked. Joseph pleaded guilty in May 2021 and was [sentenced](#) to 20 years in prison.

- **November 2018, Cary, North Carolina:** White supremacist William Josephus Warden was arrested after threatening to damage Congregation Sha'arei Shalom. Prior to the threat, Warden erected and burned a cross in Bond Park and allegedly distributed antisemitic "Aryan Youth" propaganda around the Weatherstone subdivision. He [pleaded guilty](#) in January 2020.

- **June 2017, New York, New York:** Islamist extremist Ali Kourani was arrested on charges related to completing a number of intel missions for Hezbollah, including collecting surveillance on U.S.-based individuals associated with the Israeli Defense Force and U.S. law enforcement institutions in New York. Kourani was [sentenced](#) to 40 years in prison in December 2019.

- **May 2017, Tampa, Florida:** Atomwaffen founder and neo-Nazi Brandon Russell pleaded guilty to possessing an unregistered destructive device and unlawful storage of explosive materials and was [sentenced](#) to five years in federal prison. According to authorities, he wanted "to kill civilians and target locations like power lines, nuclear reactors, and synagogues."

- **February 2017, Conway, South Carolina:** White supremacist Benjamin Thomas Samuel McDowell was convicted of illegal possession of a firearm and [sentenced](#) to 33 months imprisonment followed by 3 years of supervised release after making violent comments directed at a particular Jewish synagogue. McDowell praised Dylann Roof and spoke generally about committing acts of violence against people of the Jewish and Muslim faiths.

- **April 2016, Aventura, Florida:** Islamist extremist James Gonzalo Medina was [arrested](#) for plotting to bomb the Aventura Turnberry Jewish Center, which includes a synagogue, classrooms, and meeting halls, during Passover. Medina [explained](#) that if he was going to conduct an attack, he'd want to do it at a synagogue because "Jewish people are the ones causing the world's wars and conflicts." He noted that a Jewish holiday would be a good time to carry out the bombing. Medina was [sentenced](#) to 25 years in prison in November 2017.

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HEADLINE	01/22 Wiring, cables under bridge cut twice 2 days
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/wiring-cables-twice-cut-and-stolen-under-magnolia-bridge-bringing-internet-phone-outages/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/wiring-cables-twice-cut-and-stolen-under-magnolia-bridge-bringing-internet-phone-outages/</a>



GIST	<p>Copper wiring and fiber-optic cables have been cut and stolen from under the Magnolia Bridge in Seattle twice in the last two days, causing significant internet and phone outages in the neighborhood, a Lumen Technologies spokesperson said Saturday.</p> <p>Wiring and cables under the east abutment of the bridge were cut and stolen Thursday and again Friday, said Kerry Zimmer, a Lumen spokesperson.</p> <p>Some service was restored to the area Saturday morning, Zimmer said, but repairs continued later in the day.</p> <p>Zimmer declined to say how many customers were affected, saying the information was proprietary.</p> <p>“The fiber is repaired &amp; internet services have restored for some customers in the Magnolia area,” CenturyLink Seattle wrote on Twitter Saturday morning. CenturyLink is part of Lumen. “Work continues to repair the copper damage for full restoration. We know how important these services are &amp; will update as the repair work progresses.”</p> <p>Zimmer said they did not have an estimate for when service would be fully restored.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Edmonds 8hr-standoff ends in arrest</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/edmonds-man-barricaded-in-home-with-knife-police-shut-down-neighborhood/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/edmonds-man-barricaded-in-home-with-knife-police-shut-down-neighborhood/</a>
GIST	<p>A small neighborhood was shut down in south Edmonds on Sunday after police responded to a man brandishing a knife and threatening “homicidal violence” on his family, according to the Edmonds Police Department.</p> <p>After an 8-hour standoff police who had surrounded the house took the man into custody a little after 7 p.m., according to an Edmonds Police public information officer.</p> <p>Police said the suspect was evaluated by an aid crew for exposure to pepper powder, but no one in his family was injured.</p> <p>On Sunday morning around 10:30, when police responded to a 911 call at the 8200 block of Southwest 234th Street in Edmonds, two family members came out of the house. Two officers pushed their way in and rescued another family member while holding off a man with a knife, according to Sgt. Josh McClure with the Edmonds Police Department.</p> <p>“We don’t know about guns, but we do know he was armed with a knife and brandished that knife,” McClure said at the time.</p> <p>More officers and a SWAT team showed up and evacuated some neighbors or told others to shelter in place, McClure said, shutting down 234th Street between 80th and 84th.</p> <p>Negotiators arrived Sunday evening and communicated with the man inside, the police department tweeted.</p> <p>After 7 p.m. the SWAT team deployed exploding “distraction devices,” and the man appeared at the door, McClure said. Officers advanced, hit him with pepper balls, and took him into custody.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Greece spotlight: domestic abuse killings</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/23/world/greece-domestic-violence-abuse.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/23/world/greece-domestic-violence-abuse.html</a>
GIST	<p>ATHENS — One woman was suffocated, her body found next to her baby. Another was pushed off a cliff. Yet another was stabbed 23 times.</p>

The highly publicized and horrific killings, along with a steep rise in domestic violence cases in Greece in the past year, have pushed partner-on-partner violence into the spotlight in a country where such abuse has long been whispered about but rarely publicly discussed.

“For decades, the Greek justice system showed leniency to abusers citing ‘crimes of passion,’” Clio Papapantoleon, a prominent lawyer, said. Now, she notes, she is receiving a surge in requests for representation from victims of domestic violence.

The violence has led to interventions by the authorities, including a decision to start a national video campaign in November that urges women to leave abusers and offers free emotional support and legal advice. The [video flashes apologies](#) — “I didn’t mean it,” “My baby,” “I’m sorry” — in knife-shaped blocks of text. The police have opened special offices to deal with domestic abuse cases.

But activists and officials say that much more needs to be done to prevent more women from dying or suffering silently for years. That includes more training for police officers, who critics complain sometimes fail to see warning signs. In one recent case that horrified the nation, a woman was stabbed to death just weeks after the police failed to intervene when called by a worried neighbor.

The rise in domestic abuse mirrors increases elsewhere that, in part, appear to be [a side effect of Covid lockdowns](#), prompting the United Nations to speak of a “[shadow pandemic](#).” Pope Francis has also addressed the issue, denouncing the increase in domestic violence worldwide as “[almost satanic](#).”

In Greece, the police recorded acts of domestic violence against 5,705 women in the first 10 months of last year, up nearly 60 percent from the same period of 2020. Some of the jump is probably attributed to more women speaking up, but that does not diminish the scope of the abuse.

The number of women who were killed in episodes of domestic violence was up, too — to 16 in the first 10 months of 2021, from nine for the whole of 2020.

The brutality of the killings in Greece last year shocked the nation, dominated coverage in the news media and, in some cases, made [international headlines](#).

The violence has fueled debate on a topic that until recently had been virtually taboo in Greece, said Vasiliki Petousi, a sociologist and head of gender research at the University of Crete.

“The significance of the family in Greece, and its unity, has typically spurred many women, and often their relatives, to conceal their abuse,” Ms. Petousi said. But more women are speaking out, something she attributed in part to an increase in public awareness campaigns and media coverage. A decision by the Olympic sailing champion Sofia Bekatorou last January to [make public sexual assault allegations against a sailing federation official](#) prompted broader discussion about abuse in general, Ms. Petousi added.

Another pivotal moment came in May with the death of Caroline Crouch, killed while her child was nearby. Her husband, Charalambos Anagnostopoulos, a Greek helicopter pilot, admitted to suffocating her and is awaiting trial on murder charges.

Katerina Kostaki, a psychologist at a counseling center in Athens, one of a national network of 43 such centers, said that the gravity of the violence had spurred more victims to come forward. “Women were so scared that they’d be next that they started talking,” she said.

The centers and a 24-hour phone line have been busy. In 2021, the centers received 5,491 visits, up from 4,925 in the previous year, and the phone line got 6,797 calls, up from 4,619 in 2019.

“The figures show the impact of the pandemic on abuse,” said Maria Syrengela, the Greek deputy labor minister in charge of gender equality. “The violence has certainly increased, but so have appeals for



support as women listened, learned and trusted that there are facilities to visit and experts to listen to them.”

In the same month that the government began its video campaign, the Greek Supreme Court prosecutor, Vasilis Pliotas, called for cases of domestic violence to be fast-tracked, referring to “extreme, inconceivable, unrestrained, abhorrent and exceptionally harsh homicides that have stunned society.”

The Greek police also plan to open more special domestic abuse offices. Over the past two years, some 73 offices have been introduced nationwide to monitor such cases. In addition, six frontline units, with personnel specially trained to support victims, opened in city precincts at the end of last year — five in Athens and one in Thessaloniki.

The Greek public order minister, Takis Theodorikakos, said this past week that more frontline units would be opened to tackle the problem, citing the recent rise in cases.

Even with the attention on domestic violence, there have been indications of police officers mishandling abuse cases. In July, two police officers were suspended after failing to adequately respond to a call for help by a woman reporting domestic violence being committed against another woman in her apartment block in the Athens suburb of Dafni. The call had been flagged by the emergency service as “high priority,” but the two officers who went to the scene did not intervene.

Less than three weeks later, the woman who had been abused was [stabbed to death](#). The police said that her husband had confessed and was in custody, charged with murder.

Ms. Papapantoleon, the lawyer, said an entrenched view by the police that domestic abuse was not always serious had precluded systematic action. She said that officers needed more training.

Giorgos Kalliakmanis, the head of the police union for southeastern Athens, where the Dafni stabbing happened, said that officers were instructed to take domestic violence seriously but that excessive demands on them and a lack of specialized training could be obstacles.

“Officers are overworked, dealing with cases ranging from checks on Covid measures to thefts,” he said. “If 90 percent of domestic cases they’ve responded to in the past are simple arguments, they might not give enough weight to the more serious incidents.”

He called the actions taken in the Dafni killing an “isolated incident,” noting that the officers sent to the scene “did not evaluate it properly and should have handled it differently.”

The force is trying to better prepare its officers to respond to cases of domestic violence and began specialized training courses at the end of the last year with the help of psychologists and prosecutors, he added.

The justice system has also been criticized. Those convicted of abuse are sometimes given lenient sentences because they claim to have been provoked or because they have no prior convictions. Ms. Papapantoleon said that limits could be introduced on the amount by which sentences could be reduced because of such mitigating circumstances.

The political opposition, notably the leftist Syriza party, has proposed that the term femicide be included in Greece’s criminal code as a separate offense carrying heavier punishment.

An initiative has also been taken at the European level. In December, the European Commission laid out [rules to tackle hate crimes](#), including gender-based violence, after calls by European Parliament members in September for those offenses to be categorized as a “particularly serious crime.”

Ms. Syrengela, the minister, said that Greece aimed to do more to combat abuse.

	<p>An “action plan for sexual equality” unveiled in December includes initiatives aimed at curbing domestic violence, including more public awareness drives and bolstering the participation of women in decision-making roles in the labor market and elsewhere.</p> <p>Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said that the plan would tackle Greece’s “social ailments,” including violence against women.</p> <p>“There is a huge silent majority that are still not speaking out,” said Ms. Petousi, the professor, who called for more counseling centers and other practical measures to encourage victims of violence to come forward. “There is much, much, much more to be done.”</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Pierce Co. shooting: 1 dead, 3 injured</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/1-dead-3-injured-in-pierce-county-shooting/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/1-dead-3-injured-in-pierce-county-shooting/</a>
GIST	<p>A 27-year-old man was killed and three others were seriously injured in a Tacoma-area shooting Saturday night.</p> <p>The gunfire came from a four-plex apartment building near the intersection of Golden Given Road East and 76th Street Court East, in the unincorporated area of Midland, according to the Pierce County Sheriff’s Department. The department received several calls of shots fired at 11:19 p.m.</p> <p>Deputies found two men with serious gunshot wounds, ages 29 and 23, at the apartment complex.</p> <p>A few minutes after they were called to the scene, someone called Tacoma police to report a homicide at the intersection of East 38th Street and East I Street, about three miles north of the apartment complex, according to the Sheriff’s Department. The caller reported his family member, a 27-year old man, had been shot and killed. Police found another injured man, a 38-year-old, with the body.</p> <p>Investigators determined that those two victims from the shooting drove away from the apartment complex, a sheriff’s social media post said.</p> <p>Pierce County Sheriff’s detectives are investigating the shooting. No arrests had been made as of Sunday morning.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Major cities face dramatic rise carjackings</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/23/us/carjackings-rise-major-cities-pandemic/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/23/us/carjackings-rise-major-cities-pandemic/index.html</a>
GIST	<p>(CNN)Carjackings have risen dramatically over the past two years in some of America's biggest cities.</p> <p>Just outside Chicago, a state senator's car and other valuables were <a href="#">taken at gunpoint in December</a>, and a group of children, one just 10 years old, <a href="#">carjacked more than a dozen people</a>. A rideshare driver being carjacked <a href="#">shot his attackers</a> earlier this month in Philadelphia. Last March, <a href="#">a 12-year-old in Washington, DC</a> was arrested and charged with four counts of armed carjacking.</p> <p>"The majority of it is young joyriders. They're not keeping the cars. They're jacking cars to commit another crime, typically more serious robberies or shootings, or joyriding around for the sake of social media purpose and street cred," said Christopher Herrmann, a <a href="#">professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice</a>. "It's a disturbing trend."</p> <p>Comprehensive national data isn't available because the FBI's crime reporting system doesn't track carjackings. But large cities that track the crime reported increases in 2020 and 2021, especially as the pandemic took hold of the country.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The number of carjackings quadrupled in New York City over the last four years, according to data released by the NYPD. The city recorded more than 500 carjackings in 2021, up from 328 in 2020, 132 in 2019, and 112 in 2018.</li> </ul>

- Carjackings in Philadelphia nearly quadrupled between 2015 and 2021, according to figures released by the city's police department. They recorded more than 800 last year, up from about 170 in 2015.
- In New Orleans, there were 281 carjackings last year, up from 105 in 2018, the earliest year of available data. The city has also seen a string of carjackings this year, with NOPD reporting 39 as of January 21.
- More than 1,800 carjackings were reported in Chicago last year, the most of any large city, according to data released by police departments to CNN. Chicago's 2021 tally was the most on record over the last 20 years. Carjackings had been steadily declining in the city after 2001, hitting a low of 303 in 2014, but began to tick upward before skyrocketing to 1,400 in 2020 following the onset of the pandemic. Last year saw more than five times as many carjackings as in 2014.

**'We recognize the fear and uncertainty'**

"It is lawless," said Raymond Lopez, an alderman for Chicago's 15th Ward. "It doesn't feel lawless. It is."

Chicago's clearance rate for carjackings is low, and has further declined during the pandemic. According to the University of Chicago's Crime Lab, only 11% of carjacking offenses resulted in an arrest in 2020, down from 20% in 2019. Just 4.5% of offenses resulted in charges approved by the State Attorney's Office.

Chicago, a city of 2.7 million people, recorded more than three times as many carjackings as New York, where the population is almost three times higher. Chicago police officials declined to comment.

Philadelphia police posted a message on Facebook telling residents they were prioritizing the solving of carjacking cases and that more officers had been dedicated to that task.

"We recognize the fear and uncertainty these incidents bring, as the victims in these cases have touched nearly every demographic," the statement read. "The PPD has deployed additional resources to investigate these incidents and apprehend offenders."

In December, Pennsylvania Rep. Mary Gay Scanlon (D) was carjacked at gunpoint in Philadelphia -- a 19-year-old from Delaware was later arrested for the crime. News outlets in Philadelphia have reported more than 100 carjackings have already taken place so far this year.

**There are problems tracking data**

Many cities do not have data on carjackings readily available, as police departments will often categorize these crimes as robberies or assaults. It's difficult to understand the scope of the problem at a national level because the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting program, which law enforcement agencies voluntarily submit their crime data to, does not track carjackings.

However, more agencies are beginning to track carjackings separately. Dallas began classifying these crimes separately from robberies in their data last year and reported 453 carjackings in 2021. The Metropolitan Police Department in DC last year created a task force dedicated to addressing carjacking and auto thefts. Reports of auto thefts are also up across the country and are more reliably tracked than carjackings.

Kim Smith, director of programs at University of Chicago's Crime Lab, says that tracking crimes in greater detail is a key part of finding solutions.

"I do think it's important to be as granular as possible when you're collecting data on crime," she told CNN. "Who are the victims? Where do things take place? A lot of carjackings are done with a gun. If we're trying to address gun violence, then we need to be as granular as possible."

More detailed reporting also makes it easier to spot trends and patterns -- in its 2021 report, "How the pandemic is accelerating carjackings in Chicago," the Crime Lab found that the majority of carjackings were concentrated in the south and west sides of the city, where gun violence is disproportionately high. The majority of the victims of carjackings were Black or Hispanic.

Smith says she hopes the detail provided in the Crime Lab report can encourage officials in other cities to take a closer look at the circumstances under which these crimes occur. "There's a lot that surprised us in the analysis, and I do think some of this is a call to action," she said.

**Some 'emboldened to be repeat offenders'**

Shifting attitudes toward the juvenile justice system, and Covid-related restrictions aimed at reducing the number of people in county jails or juvenile facilities, has created a situation where accused criminals who'd normally be held in custody are free while awaiting trial, experts told CNN.

That's created a "revolving door" situation where "some were emboldened to be repeat offenders," said Jeffrey Norman, chief of the Milwaukee Police Department. "We saw this on a higher level in 2020 and 2021."

In Chicago, Lopez said people arrested and sent home with electronic monitoring sometimes reoffend while awaiting trial for something they've been arrested for.

"It's like the perfect storm, where all these soft on crime policies have come to a head during this pandemic," he told CNN.

The Crime Lab's study of Chicago's carjackings found that almost half of all carjacking arrestees in Chicago in 2020 were under 18. Between 2019 and 2020, there was a 104% increase in the number of arrestees who were minors. For many of them, it was their first contact with the criminal justice system, according to Smith.

The increase in carjackings committed by minors underscores the extent to which the pandemic has impacted young people in America -- especially in areas that were already struggling. The report states that carjackings occurred with more frequency in areas with poorer internet access and lower school attendance.

Smith noted that kids living in areas with lower internet access had fewer opportunities to engage in school, remote learning and program providers over the past two years. "The impact of the pandemic, I think, can't be overstated," she said.

Lopez said the choice to not take crime seriously among young teens will have consequences years later when they age out of the juvenile justice system.

"When you have carjackers who are 15 on their third car, that's a problem," he said.

Norman, the Milwaukee chief, said it would take a multi-faceted approach to begin addressing the rise in carjackings.

"You're not going to police your way out of this," Norman said. "Everyone has to share responsibility when it comes to kids."

Norman said that the behavior of children in a community were like "canaries in a mine. When a community has issues, kids are falling to particular types of behaviors.

"This is my thing. When a child doesn't love himself or herself, I worry about the community that has that child. That's no holds barred behavior that child will be engaged in," Norman said. "A hungry kid will do whatever it takes to put food in his stomach."

The closure of schools and advent of remote learning, the stress within households related to that and economic insecurity, and the pandemic stress on other institutions have all contributed to teens having more free time and less stability in their lives.

	<p>"You don't take care of basic things, you can't get to self-realization," Norman said. "Not every kid is out doing things to put food in their stomach. But there are things not being take care of -- whether it's having positive mentorship, or areas of socialization not (being) available.</p> <p>"It's sad seeing despair and the lack of resources any normal kid should have," Norman said. "As the old saying goes, 'Idle hands are the devil's work.'"</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 US detains smuggling ship in Gulf Oman</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/us-detains-smuggling-ship-uk-seizes-drugs-mideast-82423916">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/us-detains-smuggling-ship-uk-seizes-drugs-mideast-82423916</a>
GIST	<p>DUBAI, United Arab Emirates -- The U.S. Navy announced Sunday it seized a boat in the Gulf of Oman carrying fertilizer used to make explosives that was caught last year smuggling weapons to Yemen. The British royal navy said it confiscated 1,041 kilograms (2,295 pounds) of illegal drugs in the same waters.</p> <p>The interdictions were just the latest in the volatile waters of the Persian Gulf as American and British authorities step up seizures of contraband during the grinding conflict in Yemen and ongoing drug trafficking in the region.</p> <p>The U.S. Navy's Mideast-based 5th Fleet said its guided-missile destroyer USS Cole and patrol ships halted and searched the sailboat, a stateless fishing dhow, that was sailing from Iran on a well-worn maritime arms smuggling route to war-ravaged Yemen last Tuesday. U.S. forces found 40 tons of urea fertilizer, known to be a key ingredient in homemade improvised explosive devices, hidden on board.</p> <p>Authorities said the vessel had been previously seized off the coast of Somalia and found last year to be loaded with thousands of assault rifles and rocket launchers, among other weapons. U.N. experts say weapons with such technical characteristics likely come from Iran to support the Houthi rebels. The Navy turned over the vessel, cargo and Yemeni crew to Yemen's coast guard earlier this week.</p> <p>Yemen is awash with small arms that have been smuggled into the country's poorly controlled ports over years of conflict. Since 2015, Iranian-backed Houthi rebels have been battling a Saudi-led military coalition for control of the nation. Iran says it politically supports the rebels but denies arming them, despite evidence to the contrary.</p> <p>The smuggled weapons have helped the Houthis gain an edge against the Saudi-led coalition in the seven-year war. Violence has drastically escalated over the past week amid stalled international attempts at brokering peace. Following a deadly drone attack claimed by the rebels on Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi warplanes pounded the northern rebel-held province of Saada, hitting a prison and killing over 80 detainees.</p> <p>Officials also revealed Sunday that a British royal navy vessel had seized a large quantity of illegal drugs valued at some \$26 million from a boat sailing through the Gulf of Oman on Jan. 15.</p> <p>The HMS Montrose confiscated 663 kilograms (1,461 pounds) of heroin, 87 kilograms (191 pounds) of methamphetamine and 291 kilograms (641 pounds) of hashish and marijuana, the joint maritime task force said in a statement.</p> <p>The task force did not elaborate on where the drugs came from, who manufactured them or their ultimate destination. But Iran over the last decade has seen an explosion in the use of methamphetamine, known locally as "shisheh" or "glass" in Farsi, which has bled into neighboring countries.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/23 Texas deputy killed in 'brutal' murder</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/US/search-underway-suspect-fatal-shooting-texas-deputy-brutal/story?id=82426353">https://abcnews.go.com/US/search-underway-suspect-fatal-shooting-texas-deputy-brutal/story?id=82426353</a>

**GIST**

A search was on Sunday for a man who [gunned down](#) a Texas constable deputy with what investigators described as an "assault-type weapon" during a traffic stop near Houston.

Cpl. Charles Galloway, 47, of the Harris County Constable Precinct 5 office was shot multiple times while still seated in his patrol car and reportedly had no time to defend himself when the motorist he stopped got out of his car and opened fire without warning, authorities said.

"He was brutally murdered," Precinct 5 Constable Ted Heap said during a news conference early Sunday outside the Houston Hospital where Galloway was pronounced dead.

The shooting started about 12:45 a.m. Sunday when Galloway, a training officer, pulled over a newer-model white Toyota Avalon in a residential neighborhood of southwest Houston, according to Houston Police Chief Troy Finner.

"Witnesses described the suspect as a Hispanic male and said that he got out of his vehicle and immediately fired upon the deputy multiple times, striking him and then drove off," said Finner, adding that witnesses told investigators that the suspect was wielding an "assault-type weapon."

Heap added that Galloway "did not have an opportunity to respond or even defend himself with this brutal attack."

The gunman remained on the run Sunday and was the subject of a statewide search.

The deadly episode came during a string of law enforcement officer deaths in-the-line duty nationwide. On Friday night, a 22-year-old rookie New York City police officer was fatally shot and his partner was critically wounded when they responded to a domestic incident in Harlem.

On Dec. 29, Bradley, Illinois, Police Sgt. Marlene Rittmanic, 49, was fatally shot and her partner was wounded when they responded to a barking dog complaint at a hotel. Two people arrested in the case, including one who allegedly shot Rittmanic with her own gun, were arrested and are facing the death penalty if convicted.

Galloway's death comes about three months after Harris County Constable Precinct 4 deputy Kareem Atkins, 30, was shot to death in an ambush outside a Houston sports bar that left Atkins' partner wounded. A 19-year-old suspect was arrested in December and charged with capital murder.

"These are not assaults, these are not attacks, these are brutal, brutal murders. We have to put an end to this," Heap said. "We cannot have people like this on our streets. I don't want to raise my family, my grandchildren in a county where this type of crime is running rampant."

Heap nor Finner would comment on the reason Galloway, who was assigned to the toll road enforcement division, initiated the traffic stop.

Finner said his department's investigative and homicide units are leading the investigation.

"A message to this suspect, the best thing you can do is turn yourself in peacefully," Finner said.

Heap said Galloway is survived by a daughter and a sister. He said Galloway was a 12 1/2-year veteran of Precinct 5 and had voluntarily switched to a night shift position to become a training officer.

"There are a lot of very broken up officers who he (Galloway) meant a lot in their lives because he was the one sitting in the front seat with them," Heap said. "He was the one who was teaching them what to do and how to get home safely to their families."

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**HEADLINE**

**01/23 Train robberies a problem in Los Angeles**

SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/train-robberies-are-a-problem-in-los-angeles-and-no-one-agrees-on-how-to-stop-them-11642946401?mod=hp_lead_pos10">https://www.wsj.com/articles/train-robberies-are-a-problem-in-los-angeles-and-no-one-agrees-on-how-to-stop-them-11642946401?mod=hp_lead_pos10</a>
GIST	<p>Michelle Wilde bought a piece of sand art during a visit to Jerome, Ariz., earlier this month. Rather than carry it home, she had the shopkeeper ship the \$145 frame to her.</p> <p>Instead of arriving at her home in Everett, Wash., the package ended up next to a railroad track in East Los Angeles. The frame was gone. The box remained.</p> <p>It was among thousands of boxes recently found littered along <a href="#">Union Pacific</a> Corp. tracks in the middle of Los Angeles. <a href="#">Thieves had broken into the train cars</a> and made off with items shipped by <a href="#">Dr. Martens</a>, Harbor Freight Tools and small businesses alike. The scene has set off finger-pointing between the railroad, local officials and police about who is to blame and how to stop a modern twist on one of the country's oldest crimes.</p> <p>"Why are people breaking into [railcars] and why is no one doing anything?" Ms. Wilde said, when she was contacted by a Wall Street Journal reporter to inform her of the fate of her package. "We're like in year 13 of a pandemic so nothing surprises me about human behavior."</p> <p>Union Pacific said it has seen a 160% jump in criminal rail theft in Los Angeles since December 2020, including sharper increases in the months leading up to Christmas, when trailers are loaded with inventory bound for stores or gifts shipped to homes. The total losses to Union Pacific, with a market capitalization of \$155 billion, have come to \$5 million over the past year. That doesn't include losses tallied by customers shipping on its rails.</p> <p>Train robberies date to the dawn of railroads, and Union Pacific has had its share of famous heists. In 1899, Butch Cassidy's gang robbed the Union Pacific Overland Flyer No. 1 as it passed through Wyoming. The group stopped the train and blew up its safe. A posse was sent out in pursuit of the bandits.</p> <p>In other parts of the country, thieves occasionally plunder everything from alcohol to appliances from freight trains that either stop or crawl through areas. The railroads combat the problem with their own police forces. Union Pacific has more than 200 police officers, but they must patrol thousands of miles of track across 23 states.</p> <p>Lance Fritz, Union Pacific's chief executive officer, said rail theft has been a mostly small-scale problem. What is happening in Los Angeles is different. A couple of years ago, opportunistic individuals might see a mile-plus-long train inching through the city and pry open a car to see what was inside, maybe grab a few items, he said, but "today, that's more organized."</p> <p>The tracks being hit connect to an intermodal Union Pacific rail yard where containers are moved between trucks and trains. The rail corridor carries containers from nearby ports as well as trailers filled with packages from Amazon.com Inc., FedEx Corp. and United Parcel Service Inc., which are bound for other sorting hubs across the U.S.</p> <p>This month local news footage showing packages strewn along the tracks went viral. On Thursday, empty packages were still piled on the sidewalks near the rails. As trains rolled by, railcars could be seen with their doors hanging open.</p> <p>Union Pacific complained in a December letter to Los Angeles officials that they weren't doing enough to police the area and prosecute individuals caught trespassing.</p> <p>Adrian Guerrero, a general director of public affairs at Union Pacific, said lenient prosecution means many of those arrested for rifling through railcars have their charges reduced to a misdemeanor or petty offense—and are often quickly released. "We just don't see the criminal justice system holding these people accountable," Mr. Guerrero said.</p>



In a letter responding to Mr. Guerrero sent on Friday, Los Angeles District Attorney George Gascón said the number of cases submitted to his office in which Union Pacific was listed as the victim had fallen each of the past two years, from 78 cases in 2019 to 47 in 2021. The DA brought charges in 55% of those cases, Mr. Gascón said, with the others dismissed for lack of evidence or because they didn't involve allegations of burglary, theft or tampering.

"It is very telling that other major railroad operations in the area are not facing the same level of theft at their facilities as UP," Mr. Gascón wrote. "My Office is not tasked with keeping your sites secure."

Los Angeles Police Capt. German Hurtado, who works in the Hollenbeck station covering the area, said Union Pacific had downsized its police force in 2020, leaving the company with just six officers patrolling between Yuma, Ariz., and the Pacific coast. Resignations and Covid-19 have also left the LAPD short roughly 2,000 officers, he said, including 50 at his station.

The LAPD has run several task forces around the tracks, he said, and since August has arrested about 125 people for rail-related offenses, including burglary and trespassing.

Union Pacific executives said they have added dozens of agents in recent months to patrol the area in Los Angeles, and are using drones, specialized fencing and trespass detection systems to combat the theft. The railroad said it is also actively looking to hire more officers. "While we have a private police force, they do not supplant the vital need and authority of local law enforcement," a spokeswoman said.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom visited the scene Thursday and helped clean up some of the boxes scattered along the tracks. He touted part of his proposed budget, which would grant \$255 million to local law enforcement over the next three years and create a dedicated unit to focus on retail, train and auto theft.

"There's nothing acceptable about this," Mr. Newsom said of the thefts. "It looked like a third-world country."

Jim Foote, the CEO of CSX Corp. , another freight railroad that operates in the eastern U.S., said rail theft elsewhere isn't as rampant as what he sees happening in Los Angeles. He recalls 20 years ago, while working for Canadian National Railway, there was a similar problem in Chicago. To deal with it, the railroad tried to avoid stopping trains where they were getting ransacked.

"We do everything we can to protect our customer shipments, but if the train stops at the wrong time and the wrong place, the modern-day Jesse James will get you," Mr. Foote said.

Casey Rowcliffe had ordered a battery for his RV that never showed up. He hadn't given much thought to his missing package until he saw the viral video showing the littered stretch of tracks in Los Angeles.

"I figured it was stuck in the port or somebody's got it," the 45-year-old general contractor said. The location of the battery remains a mystery. But the box with his Bellingham, Wash., address was among those found by a Journal reporter. "Out of all those packages, you picked mine?" Mr. Rowcliffe said.

A FedEx spokeswoman said it has measures in place to discourage theft, including advanced locking mechanisms on railcars. In cases where railcars are tampered with, FedEx works with the railroads to retrieve any shipments they can. A UPS spokesman said it would take a collective response to deter criminals and the company has streamlined the claims process for when there are issues with shipments.

Nellie Bly Kaleidoscopes and Art Glass, the small Arizona shop that sent Ms. Wilde her frame, ships out anywhere from three to 20 packages a day. When notified that its package was found torn open in Los Angeles, the shop reached out to Ms. Wilde, shipped out a replacement and started the claims process.

Anne Miranda, the store's shipping manager, said it typically only has problems with a handful of shipments a year. "That was before the world went crazy," she said.

HEADLINE	01/23 Rio gangs blend religion and violence
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/23/christ-and-cocaine-rios-gangs-of-god-blend-faith-and-violence">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/23/christ-and-cocaine-rios-gangs-of-god-blend-faith-and-violence</a>
GIST	<p>“Pastor, do you think we could hold a service at my house next Thursday?” the peroxide-haired gangster wondered, cradling an AK-47 in his lap as he took a seat beside the man of God.</p> <p>A few months earlier, the 23-year-old had bought his first home with the fruits of his illegal work as a footsoldier for one of Rio de Janeiro’s drug factions. Now, he wanted to give thanks for the blessings he believed he had received from above.</p> <p>“I’ve dodged death so many times. It was He who delivered me from evil,” the drug trafficker reflected as he began another 12-hour night shift on the frontline of the Brazilian city’s drug conflict.</p> <p>That Christian conviction was echoed all around the young outlaw, on walls adorned with frescoes of the Old City of Jerusalem and an extract from the Epistle to the Galatians: “Walk by the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.”</p> <p>The gangster’s body celebrated his religion, too. One wrist carried a tattoo of a cross and the words “Jesus lives”. The other featured the motto: “May my courage be greater than my fear and my strength as great as my faith”.</p> <p>“They know theirs is a cut-throat world so they seek something to believe in,” said Elias Santana, a favela-based preacher who has made it his mission to save the souls of Rio’s ever more evangelical gangsters.</p> <p>When Rio’s drug conflict exploded in the 1980s, <a href="#">Brazil’s evangelical revolution</a> was still gathering pace and many gangsters looked to Afro-Brazilian deities such as Ogum, the God of war, for protection. Drug bosses frequented Afro-Brazilian temples, built shrines to Orixás and wore necklaces to show their devotion to the Umbanda and Candomblé faiths.</p> <p>Four decades later, many of those sanctuaries have been replaced with sculptures of Bibles and murals of the Last Supper, as a new generation of born-again criminals takes power, influenced by a brotherhood of pentecostal preachers.</p> <p>The sway those pastors hold over Rio’s so-called <a href="#">“narco-pentecostals”</a> is unmissable in the hundreds of favelas controlled by gunmen from its three main gangs: the Red Command (CV), the Friends of the Friends (ADA) and, perhaps the most evangelical of all, the Pure Third Command (TCP).</p> <p>Drug lords, some regular churchgoers, have incorporated Christian symbols into their ultra-violent trade. Packets of cocaine, handguns and uniforms are emblazoned with the Star of David – a reference to the Pentecostal belief that the return of Jews to Israel represents progress towards the second coming. Gang-commissioned graffiti offers spiritual guidance and heavenly praise.</p> <p>On one recent evening, a senior trafficker wandered into a service in suburban Rio, unarmed and unannounced, as a preacher read from the Book of John. “I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.” Surrounded by local children and their smartly-dressed parents, the gangster took a white plastic chair in the corner, bowed his head and began to pray.</p> <p>Nowhere is the evangelisation of Rio’s underworld more visible than the Complexo de Israel, a cluster of five favelas near the international airport governed by Peixão (“Big Fish”), a preacher turned drug peddler who takes his nickname from the ichthys “Jesus” fish. (The drug lord’s second-in-command is named after the Judean prophet Jeremiah, while their troops are known as the Army of the Living God).</p>

In tribute to the area's boss, a mural of the cartoon character [Fishtronaut](#) has been painted at one entrance, framed by a line from Psalm 33: "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord".

A neon Star of David, at night visible for miles around, sits on a water tower at one of the complex's highest points. Nearby, on an outcrop looking south towards Rio's Christ the Redeemer statue, a Bible sits in a display case. "Rescue me, O Lord, from evil men," reads its inscription, from Psalm 140. "Protect me from men of violence who devise evil plans in their hearts and stir up war every day."

Police call [Peixão](#), who is [wanted for dozens of crimes](#) including torture, murder and concealment of death, one of Rio's most ambitious and iron-handed villains, whose fast-growing criminal empire makes a mockery of his purported Christian faith. In 2019 [he was accused of leading](#) the Bonde de Jesus (Jesus Crew), a gang of rifle-toting extremists who allegedly ransacked a succession of Afro-Brazilian temples. Afro-Brazilian celebrations have [reportedly been outlawed](#) in the Complex of Israel.

But some residents say the bling-averse gangster's Bible-infused "doctrine" – which includes keeping the community's streets tidy and well-lit, acts of charity to impoverished locals, discouraging swearing and drug use among gang members and a military-style focus on discipline – has improved life in a ghetto long neglected by the state.

"There's order in the favela," said Juju Rude, a local rapper [whose songs](#) describe life in a community ruled by God-fearing gangsters.

The Afro-Brazilian musician, who identifies as an evangelical Christian and has an Uzi tattooed on her belly, said she was troubled by Rio's [surge in faith-related bigotry and violence](#). "It's not cool to see people prevented from practising their faith in the place where they live."

Overall, however, she thought life had improved under the favela's current churchgoing administrator: "It's new for everyone, an environment like this."

Rio's narco-pentecostals admit their often brutal line of work clashes with the scripture they profess to follow. As one top trafficker in another gang-run part of town lounged on top of a Honda motorbike surrounded by bodyguards with automatic rifles, he acknowledged the drug trade was an "evil" business that sometimes entailed horrific violence.

But the gangster claimed his faith inspired him to minimise the barbarity, by trying to persuade fellow criminals to spare those who crossed them. "Those I can save, I save," he said, remembering how he once persuaded a colleague not to murder a trafficker who stole a weapon and defected to a rival group.

Instead, the traitor was forced to clasp his hands together, as if in prayer, and shot at close range, shattering his metacarpal bones but preserving his life.

In another favela, a footsoldier with a Bible tattooed on his chest spoke of how he enjoyed attending services at the God is Love pentecostal church, a fundamentalist congregation with temples across the US and Europe. "It makes me feel lighter," he said, before racing away on his motorbike with an AR-15 slung over his shoulder.

Christina Vital, an academic who has spent nearly 30 years [studying](#) evangelism's advance into gangland Rio, said it was inevitable traffickers had embraced Christianity, given the breathtaking evangelical tsunami that has swept over Brazilian society during that time. Evangelicals now occupied key positions in the world of crime, just as they did in the media, politics, judiciary and culture, she said.

Nor was it surprising that vulnerable, marginalised young men sought guidance and compassion from [the preachers searching Rio's favelas for souls](#): "It's such an awful, fragile life. They live in fear."

Vital said the consequences of the improbable fusion between crime and [Christianity](#) were unclear. There was evidence of “a certain containment” of bloodshed, she said, but the blending of religious intolerance with “staggering” gang violence was disturbing.

Pastor Elias said he respected all faiths and believed his Godly crusade was helping pacify a city where hundreds of mostly young, black lives are lost each year. “This is Christianity’s duty: to save.”

A week after being invited to bless the footsoldier’s first home, the preacher donned a garish magenta shirt and set off down winding, muddy passageways to the modest first-floor abode for which the criminal had paid 8,000 reals (£1,000).

He squeezed inside, accompanied by half a dozen Bible-carrying helpers, and the group began to sing an anthem called [“Oh! Jesus Loves me”](#). “Far from the Lord, I walked, on the path of horror. Never did I ask about Jesus. Nor did I seek His love,” they sung as the gangster bowed his head.

When the singing stopped, a female church member stepped forward and clutched the host’s arm as his girlfriend and mother – a cleaner just home from work – looked on. “God has chosen you. God is here right now!” the woman told him. “Just look at my goosebumps! God is here!” she proclaimed, her voice trembling as she summoned an angel to watch over the trafficker’s life.

After 20 minutes of prayer and a reading from Psalm 23, the trafficker thanked his visitors over hotdogs and led them outside, visibly moved by their words.

“It’s a life of loneliness,” said the pastor, “and Christ has come to free them from this servitude.”

A warm breeze coursed through the favela’s narrow back alleys and for a moment the world seemed at peace – but the calm lasted only two hours.

Shortly after midnight the crackle of gunfire woke residents, as traffickers stormed a nearby neighbourhood in the hope of expanding their domain. Another night of chaos and heartbreak in a city crying out to be saved.

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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 Maryland school shooting: teen held</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/22/maryland-school-shooting-teen-faces-attempted-murder/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/22/maryland-school-shooting-teen-faces-attempted-murder/</a>
GIST	<p>GAITHERSBURG, Md. — A 17-year-old was being held without bond Saturday on charges including attempted second-degree murder in connection with the shooting of a fellow student at a high school in a Maryland suburb of the nation’s capital, authorities said.</p> <p>The suspect, Steven Alston Jr., was taken into custody about two hours after officers were called to Magruder High School in Rockville on Friday afternoon and is facing charges as an adult, Montgomery County police said.</p> <p>A police news release said Saturday that Alston also is facing a charge of first-degree assault and three weapons-related counts. The Associated Press does not normally identify juveniles charged with offenses but is doing so because police named Alston and said he is facing prosecution on serious charges as an adult.</p> <p>Police said school security found a 15-year-old male student in a bathroom with a gunshot wound after Friday’s shooting. The wounded student, a 10th grader who hasn’t been identified, underwent surgery at a hospital and was in critical condition Saturday, the news release said.</p> <p>Police said officers on Friday afternoon found Alston in a classroom and a gun recovered at the school was believed to have been used in the shooting.</p>

	<p>Montgomery County Police Chief Marcus Jones said Friday it wasn't clear what led to the shooting.</p> <p>Saturday's news release said there's no evidence suggesting the suspect, who is in the 11th grade, was targeting anyone else within the school of about 1,700 students. The shooting led to an hourslong lockdown before authorities deemed the school safe and dismissed students Friday.</p> <p>There was nothing available Saturday afternoon about Alston's case on a searchable database of Maryland court records. An email to the State's Attorney's Office requesting information about Alston's attorney wasn't immediately returned.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Mexico beach resort tourists shot, killed</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/22/one-canadian-killed-after-tourists-shot-at-mexican-beach-resort-hotel">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/22/one-canadian-killed-after-tourists-shot-at-mexican-beach-resort-hotel</a>
GIST	<p>Three Canadian visitors have been shot by a lone gunman in their hotel in the Mexican resort town of Playa del Carmen – in an attack security officials are calling targeted and alleging involved individuals with criminal records.</p> <p>One of the tourists died of their injuries while being transported to hospital following the incident on Friday, according to the Quintana Roo state public security secretary, Lucio Hernández Gutiérrez, who confirmed the nationality of the victims.</p> <p>The state prosecutor's office later tweeted that a second Canadian had died of their injuries.</p> <p><a href="#">The first person who died</a> – identified as ATCH – “had a criminal record: drug trafficking, use of a false identity, among other things”, the office said.</p> <p>ATCH “was considered a very dangerous person in Canada”, state prosecutor Óscar Montes de Oca Rosales <a href="#">told Radio Fórmula</a>.</p> <p>The second deceased victim, RJD, “also had a criminal history”, according to the prosecutor's office.</p> <p>Information shared on social media showed a lone attacker dressed in a grey tracksuit and brandishing a pistol on the grounds of the Xcaret hotel. A video posted on Twitter showed people shrieking as a victim received first aid. The video later panned to show two more victims lying wounded by the pool – one heavily bleeding.</p> <p>“He's still breathing,” one person could be heard saying amid the chaos.</p> <p>The attacker escaped into the thick tropical vegetation surrounding Xcaret – which is famed for its theme parks on the Riviera Maya – and remains at large. Hernández Gutiérrez said the shooting “stemmed from an argument between hotel guests”.</p> <p>Global Affairs <a href="#">Canada</a> said in a short statement it is “aware of reports that Canadian citizens have been affected by an incident in Mexico”.</p> <p>The attack at a luxury hotel compound comes amid a string of shootouts on the Yucatan peninsula's Mayan Riviera, which have killed or injured tourists who were caught in the crossfire.</p> <p>A team of <a href="#">at least 10 gunmen stormed a beach at a luxury hotel near Cancún</a> in November, killing a person linked to a rival faction and dragging away another person trying to hide.</p> <p><a href="#">A Californian travel blogger and a German tourist were killed</a> in October at a restaurant in Tulum, south of Playa del Carmen, during a shootout between suspected gang members.</p>

	<p>The region draws in millions of tourists annually – including during the coronavirus pandemic as <a href="#">Mexico</a> has imposed no Covid tests or vaccination requirements for travellers.</p> <p>But <a href="#">many of Mexico's major drug cartels are disputing the region</a>, where they run extortion rackets and deal drugs to tourists.</p> <p>State officials have blamed the rising violence on disputes over drug dealing – with foreign tourists being the biggest buyers.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/22 Charge: threats over school mask rule</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/22/virginia-mother-charged-school-mask-rule">https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/22/virginia-mother-charged-school-mask-rule</a>
GIST	<p>A Virginia mother was charged with making a threat on school property after she told local board members she would bring “every single gun loaded” if the district instituted a mask mandate.</p> <p>Renewed mask fights were touched off this month after the new Republican governor of Virginia, Glenn Youngkin, issued an executive order making masks optional for students, subject to the preference of parents.</p> <p>In Luray, a small town in the Shenandoah Valley, the governor’s move prompted a special board meeting on Covid-19 mitigation strategies.</p> <p>At the Thursday meeting, Amelia Ruffner King, 42, told school board members: “No mask mandates – my child, my children will not come to school on Monday with masks on. That’s not happening.”</p> <p>She continued: “And I will bring every single gun loaded and ready to – I will,” before she was cut off.</p> <p>“That’s three minutes,” a school official said.</p> <p>Initially, police said they had increased security at schools but not made any arrests.</p> <p>Ruffner King’s statement “absolutely caused public alarm”, police said, adding that she “contacted law enforcement to apologize”.</p> <p>“We have been in contact with the parent who made the statement, she is cooperating with law enforcement,” police said. “This incident is still under investigation.”</p> <p>Police later charged Ruffner King and released her, on a \$5,000 bond.</p> <p>After the meeting, school superintendent Antonio Fox said in a letter: “Page county public schools does not take these kinds of statements lightly.”</p> <p>Later that evening, board members voted to move from required universal masking to optional masking.</p> <p>The decision was made in spite of warnings from the superintendent that without masks, more students may be forced to quarantine if a student is found to be infected.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Belligerent flight passenger charged assault</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/passenger-from-ireland-charged-with-assault-on-delta-flight-to-new-york/2022/01/21/14518348-7b10-11ec-bf97-6eac6f77fba2_story.html">https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/passenger-from-ireland-charged-with-assault-on-delta-flight-to-new-york/2022/01/21/14518348-7b10-11ec-bf97-6eac6f77fba2_story.html</a>
GIST	<p>NEW YORK — A belligerent Delta Air Lines passenger who refused to wear a mask during a recent eight-hour flight from Dublin to New York has been charged with assaulting and intimidating a member of</p>

the crew — one of several who tried to get him under control — as he terrorized everyone aboard throughout the trip.

Shane McNerney, 29, a soccer player from Galway, Ireland, threw tantrums and went maskless on the Jan. 7 international flight, despite being asked “dozens of times” by crew members to wear a mask, court documents say.

He also created chaos in other ways throughout the trip — including mooning people as he was escorted back to his seat, throwing a drink can at the head of another passenger and kicking the seat of the person in front of him, according to a criminal complaint filed in federal court in Brooklyn.

Two hours into the flight, the captain, on a break, spoke to McNerney, who took off his cap twice, put it on the captain’s head, then allegedly held his fist to the captain’s face and said: “Don’t touch me.”

As the plane was landing, when passengers and crew members were seated and wearing seat belts, McNerney defiantly stood in the aisle and refused to sit, officials said.

McNerney was charged with assaulting and intimidating a crew member on Delta Flight 45. He was released on a \$20,000 bond when he appeared before a judge a week ago. His case was unsealed on Friday.

A federal public defender who represents McNerney declined to comment.

McNerney was headed to Daytona, Fla., where he was taking a job teaching soccer.

The athlete was featured in an [Irish Mirror](#) piece from last April in which he described moving to Chicago, although it’s not clear how long he stayed there. McNerney, who has also worked as a model according to the piece, discussed how impressed he was that the American city was up and running — thanks to its mask-wearing population.

“All the gyms, hotels, restaurants and bars are open over here, you just need to wear a mask wherever you go.”

Mask mandates on planes have resulted in a number of tense episodes between travelers and the staff tasked with enforcing them. An [American Airlines flight](#) on its way to London from Miami carrying 129 passengers and 14 crew on Wednesday turned around an hour after departure because of an unruly customer, a woman said to be in her 40s who protested mask-wearing.

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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Charge: threats to kill Ga. election officials</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/us/politics/georgia-election-worker-threats-charges.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/us/politics/georgia-election-worker-threats-charges.html</a>
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The Justice Department on Friday <a href="#">charged a Texas man</a> with publicly calling for the assassination of Georgia’s election officials on the day before the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol.</p> <p>The case is the first brought by the department’s Election Threats Task Force, an <a href="#">agency created last summer</a> to address threats against elections and election workers. Federal prosecutors accused the man, Chad Christopher Stark, 54, of Leander, Texas, of calling for “Georgia Patriots” to “put a bullet” in a Georgia election official the indictment refers to as Official A.</p> <p>Mr. Stark, according to the three-page indictment, made the threat in a post on Craigslist, the online message board, while then-President Donald J. Trump and his allies were putting public pressure on Brad Raffensperger, the Georgia secretary of state who certified <a href="#">Mr. Trump’s defeat in Georgia</a> to Joseph R. Biden Jr.</p>



“Georgia Patriots it’s time for us to take back our state from these Lawless treasonous traitors,” Mr. Stark wrote, according to the indictment. “It’s time to invoke our Second Amendment right it’s time to put a bullet in the treasonous Chinese [Official A]. Then we work our way down to [Official B] the local and federal corrupt judges.”

Mr. Stark was charged with one count of communicating interstate threats.

The Craigslist posting came at a moment of intense political pressure against election officials in battleground states. Mr. Trump [had phoned Mr. Raffensperger](#) on Jan. 2 last year and demanded that he “find” nearly 12,000 votes to overturn Mr. Biden’s victory in Georgia. The posting was published on Jan. 5, a day before a Trump-inspired crowd attacked the United States Capitol in an effort to block Congress from certifying Mr. Biden as the next president.

On Thursday, a district attorney in Atlanta asked a judge [to convene a special grand jury](#) to help a criminal investigation into Mr. Trump’s attempts to overturn the 2020 election results in Georgia. If the investigation proceeds, legal experts say that the former president’s potential criminal exposure could include charges of racketeering or conspiracy to commit election fraud.

Mr. Raffensperger on Friday did not confirm if he was among the election officials targeted.

“I strongly condemn threats against election workers and those who volunteer in elections,” he said in a statement. “These are the people who make our democracy work.”

Kenneth A. Polite Jr., the head of the Justice Department’s Criminal Division, said on Friday that the task force is reviewing over 850 reports of threats to election officials and has opened dozens of criminal investigations.

During the 2020 election cycle and in its immediate aftermath, election workers “came under unprecedented verbal assault for doing nothing more than their jobs,” Mr. Polite told reporters Friday.

“As the attorney general and deputy attorney general have both emphasized previously: We will not tolerate the intimidation of those who safeguard our electoral system.”

The task force, created last June by the deputy attorney general, Lisa O. Monaco, developed a system to log and track all reported threats to election workers and F.B.I. agents, and federal prosecutors were trained to take in, assess and investigate the allegations. Mr. Polite said the task force has prioritized finding ways to enhance security for state and local election workers.

The Texas case represents the task force’s first indictment and arrest. Mr. Polite declined to elaborate on what Mr. Stark may have planned to do.

“The communication here speaks for itself,” Mr. Polite said, referring to Mr. Stark’s Craigslist post, which offered \$10,000 and called for “Patriots” to “exterminate these people.”

In addition to the two Georgia election officials, Mr. Stark’s Craigslist post also threatened a third Georgia official.

He wrote: “militia up Georgia it’s time to spill blood .... we need to pay a visit to [Official C] and her family as well and put a bullet her behind the ears.”

An aide to Stacey Abrams, the Georgia Democrat who is running for governor, said he did not know if Ms. Abrams was Official C.

Threats against Georgia’s election officials continued well after the state finished counting and recounting the votes in its 2020 presidential contest. Two low-level workers whom Mr. Trump and his allies in the right-wing media falsely accused of counting fraudulent votes [have sued the Gateway Pundit website](#), One

	<p>America News Network and Rudolph W. Giuliani, Mr. Trump’s lawyer, for spreading lies about their conduct.</p> <p>Mr. Raffensperger, a Republican, has faced substantial blame from Trump allies for certifying Mr. Biden’s victory. He faces a primary challenge this year from Representative Jody Hice of Georgia, who has adopted many of Mr. Trump’s false claims about the election.</p> <p>Mr. Stark could not be reached for comment. His initial court appearance was in Austin, Texas, on Friday afternoon, and the judge appointed the federal public defender’s office to represent him. He was released on bond and his arraignment was set for Feb. 4 in Atlanta. Mr. Stark faces up to five years in prison if convicted.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 FBI breached synagogue, hostages escape</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/us/texas-synagogue-hostages-fbi.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/us/texas-synagogue-hostages-fbi.html</a>
GIST	<p>COLLEYVILLE, Texas — Eleven hours into the standoff in a synagogue in suburban Fort Worth on Saturday evening, it was clear to the F.B.I. that the situation was devolving. The attacker, who had entered Congregation Beth Israel that morning and taken four hostages, was becoming more agitated and less communicative.</p> <p>“He was giving ultimatums and deadlines about killing hostages,” Matthew DeSarno, the bureau’s top agent in Dallas, said in an interview on Friday. “We took him at his word.”</p> <p>Mr. DeSarno decided to launch the F.B.I.’s elite Hostage Rescue Team, which had arrived from Quantico, Va. Inside the synagogue, Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker had come to a similar conclusion: It was time to take action.</p> <p>At around 9 p.m., almost simultaneously, and unaware of the other group’s plans, the hostages inside the sanctuary moved for an exit as the highly trained agents outside moved in elsewhere. As the congregants staged a daring escape, the agents shot and killed the attacker, Malik Faisal Akram, a British citizen.</p> <p>The details of the hostages’ dramatic recovery had been murky until Friday. Law enforcement initially characterized the event as a rescue. But two of the hostages described it as an escape.</p> <p>On Friday, Rabbi Cytron-Walker described looking for an opportunity to flee as night fell with three hostages remaining; one had been released around 5 p.m. “None of us could imagine one person going and leaving the others behind,” he said. When Mr. Akram had a cup of juice in one hand and seemed less prepared to respond to a quick motion, they got their chance. Rabbi Cytron-Walker threw a chair at Mr. Akram and the hostages ran for the door.</p> <p>The F.B.I. also provided a more detailed account of what happened outside the sanctuary in those final moments at a Friday news conference and in interviews with The New York Times.</p> <p>Paul Haertel, the assistant director of the F.B.I.’s Critical Incident Response Group, said the call to mobilize the hostage teams and other personnel went out quickly after law enforcement officials got word of the standoff at 10:40 a.m. The two rescue teams made their way to Richmond, Va., where they boarded one of the F.B.I.’s Boeing 757s. Roughly six hours later, the team and other personnel, including bomb technicians and medics, arrived in Colleyville.</p> <p>“We were starting to develop a picture of what was going on,” Mr. Haertel said.</p> <p>Mr. DeSarno, a veteran counterterrorism investigator, said he had never ordered a hostage rescue before. “The situation was quickly getting more dire,” he said, adding that it was “high risk and high reward.”</p>

Mr. DeSarno said the hostage teams breached the south and west sides of the temple as the hostages exited the northeast side. He said he had no idea the hostages had escaped when the teams entered the temple. The medical examiner said on Friday that Mr. Akram's death had been ruled a homicide.

Rabbi Cytron-Walker and Jeffrey Cohen, who is identified on the synagogue's website as its vice president, have credited security training with their ability to maneuver the escape from inside. The rabbi [told The Times](#) that he had participated in at least four trainings in recent years.

The other two hostages have not been named publicly.

Part of the attack at Congregation Beth Israel was livestreamed because the synagogue had been sharing its services online as a pandemic precaution. On that feed, Mr. Akram could be heard referring to Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani neuroscientist who is serving an 86-year prison sentence in nearby Fort Worth. Ms. Siddiqui was convicted in a federal court in 2010 for trying to kill American soldiers in Afghanistan and other "terroristic events."

Mr. DeSarno said during a news conference on Friday that it appeared Mr. Akram had targeted the synagogue because it was the closest one to the federal prison where Ms. Siddiqui is being held in Texas. Christopher A. Wray, the bureau's director, [said on Thursday](#) that the F.B.I. was treating the attack as "an act of terrorism targeting the Jewish community." Mr. DeSarno described it as "both a hate crime and an act of terrorism."

Rabbi Cytron-Walker has said Mr. Akram's first demand was to speak with Angela Buchdahl, senior rabbi at Central Synagogue in New York. Mr. Akram believed "she was the most influential rabbi," the rabbi said on Thursday in a webinar hosted by the Anti-Defamation League.

Mr. DeSarno said the F.B.I. was still investigating how Mr. Akram managed to acquire the handgun used to hold the worshippers hostage. He said the gun appeared to be illegally obtained.

The deployment to Texas was one of several for members of the Hostage Rescue Team last week, including another [high-risk operation](#) in which a 31-year-old man named Michael Neuman was killed in Arkansas.

Some synagogues across the country are using this weekend's services to express solidarity against antisemitism. In New York, Mayor Eric Adams was scheduled to speak at Friday evening services at Central Synagogue, where Rabbi Buchdahl presides.

And in Colleyville, Rabbi Cytron-Walker planned to conduct services for his congregation on Friday and Saturday. His wish for the Jewish community and beyond, he said, was "to have a Shabbat shalom, a sabbath of peace."

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HEADLINE	01/21 NYPD officers shot responding to 911 call
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/21/nyregion/nypd-officers-shot-harlem#nypd-officers-shot-harlem">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/21/nyregion/nypd-officers-shot-harlem#nypd-officers-shot-harlem</a> <a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/21/nyregion/nypd-officers-shot-harlem#what-we-know-about-the-man-who-officials-say-shot-two-police-officers">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/21/nyregion/nypd-officers-shot-harlem#what-we-know-about-the-man-who-officials-say-shot-two-police-officers</a>
GIST	<p>One New York City police officer was killed and another was critically wounded when a gunman opened fire on them inside a Harlem apartment on Friday, the police said. They were the third and fourth officers to be shot in the line of duty this week, according to the police.</p> <p>The police initially reported that both officers had been killed, but later said one was in critical condition at Harlem Hospital. <a href="#">The police said</a> the officer who was killed was Jason Rivera, 22, who joined the department in November 2020. The critically injured officer was identified as Wilbert Mora, 27; he joined the department in 2018.</p>

The gunman, identified by the police as Lashawn McNeil, 47, was shot in the arm and head by a third officer who was at the scene of the confrontation, an apartment on West 135th Street near Lenox Avenue, officials said. He survived but was in critical condition, the police said.

Speaking at a news conference at the hospital where the two officers were taken after being shot, Keechant Sewell, the police commissioner, described Officer Rivera as a “son, husband, officer and friend” who had been “killed because he did what we asked him to do.”

“I’m struggling to find the words to express the tragedy we are enduring,” said Ms. Sewell, her voice rising in anger. Like the man who hired her, Mayor Eric Adams, she began her job overseeing the largest police force in the United States this month.

“We’re mourning, and we’re angry,” she added.

Mr. Adams — who had been in the Bronx earlier attending a vigil for [a baby who was hit in the face by a stray bullet](#) on Wednesday night — also spoke with a raised voice at the news conference.

“This was just not an attack on three brave officers,” he said. “This was an attack on the City of New York” and “an attack on the children and families of this city.”

The shooting of the officers was the latest in a series of crimes early in Mr. Adams’s term that has tested his vow to heighten public safety after increases in certain crimes amid the pandemic.

The chief of detectives, James W. Essig, gave the following account of the events surrounding the shooting:

Around 6:30 p.m. on Friday, three officers from the 32nd Precinct answered a 911 call from a woman who said she was fighting with her son. When the officers arrived at the apartment, they were met by the woman and a second son. There was no indication from the 911 call, officials said, that there were weapons in the apartment.

The woman told the officers that the son she had been fighting with was in a back bedroom at the end of a long, narrow hallway. As officers Mora and Rivera approached the bedroom, the door swung open and Mr. McNeil began firing. After shooting the two officers, Mr. McNeil tried to leave the apartment and was shot by the third officer, whose name has not been released.

Mr. McNeil, 47, was on probation after being arrested in New York on a felony drug charge around 2003, officials said. He also had four arrests in other states, all more than a decade ago.

On Tuesday, [an officer was shot in the leg](#) as he scuffled with a teenage suspect during a confrontation in the Bronx. And early Thursday, [a detective was shot in the leg](#) when a man fired through a door during a search for drugs at a Staten Island home, officials said. Neither of their injuries was life-threatening.

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The gunman who officials said shot two New York City police officers appears to have moved up and down the East Coast and had several run-ins with law enforcement over the years before the fatal confrontation on Friday night.

The 47-year-old man, whom the police identified as Lashawn J. McNeil, had been fighting with his mother in an apartment building in Harlem when officers were called to the home, according to a 911 call, the police said. As two officers approached a back bedroom at the end of a narrow hallway, the door flew open and Mr. McNeil began firing shots, officials said.

The police said he killed one officer and left another in critical condition. A third officer shot Mr. McNeil in the head and arm. He was also in critical condition on Friday night, the police said.

<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	<p>Few details of Mr. McNeil's life were clear in the hours after the shooting.</p> <p>He was married in October 1996, just days before his 22nd birthday, according to a New York State marriage license under his name. For some time, Mr. McNeil, who is roughly 5 foot 8 inches tall with a medium build, appeared to have lived in the Far Rockaway section of Queens, before traveling out of state.</p> <p>Two years after his marriage, he was arrested in South Carolina for the unlawful possession of a weapon, the police said.</p> <p>It was the start of a five-year period during which he had several encounters with law enforcement as he moved through states on the East Coast, the police said. By 2002, he was spending time in Pennsylvania, where he had an address in Lehigh County and where he was arrested on charges of assaulting a police officer, officials said.</p> <p>And the following year, Mr. McNeil was arrested in three drug-related cases across Pennsylvania and New York, officials said.</p> <p>Over the next decade and a half, however, Mr. McNeil's brushes with the police appeared to slow down: Officials did not list any additional arrests after 2003, though it was unclear if other cases may have been sealed.</p> <p>Little information was available about his life between 2003 and Friday night, when the police said he shot the two officers. Officials said that the gun he used was equipped with a high-capacity magazine and had been stolen in Baltimore in 2017.</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Convicted: killed store owner; jailed 40yrs</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://komonews.com/news/local/man-sentenced-to-40-years-convicted-of-killing-beloved-puyallup-corner-store-owner">https://komonews.com/news/local/man-sentenced-to-40-years-convicted-of-killing-beloved-puyallup-corner-store-owner</a>
GIST	<p>PUYALLUP, Wash. — A man was sentenced Friday to several years in prison in connection with the death nearly three years ago of a beloved 79-year-old store owner and for killing his own accomplice in the hold-up.</p> <p>Robbie Thompson, who is 19 years old now but was a teenager when he killed his victims, entered the Pierce County Superior Court alone except for court security deputies and his defense attorneys and possibly some family.</p> <p>But for the one he was convicted of killing, there was a huge outpouring of community support at the time of the robbery and deadly shooting of Soon Ja Nam, who owned the convenience store.</p> <p>It was a Saturday evening on April 27, 2019 at the Nam's Handy Corner Grocery store in Puyallup when two armed robbers came in demanding money, which investigator say she handed over.</p> <p>Investigators said the assailants shot the woman in the back despite her compliance with their requests.</p> <p>"A very nice old lady got shot and killed by a coward," said neighbor Brandon Edgin.</p> <p>The investigation led to Thompson who was charged with killing his friend and accomplice Franklin Thuo. They were friends at Decatur High School in Federal Way.</p> <p>At sentencing Friday, he remained defiant while addressing the court. He denied killing Nam and Thuo.</p> <p>"I'd like to address the family of Ms. Nam first and say I'm sorry for your loss and the position I've put myself in," Thompson said. "I apologize for being an irresponsible child without thinking. The decision I</p>

	<p>made was impactful and regrettable. Regardless of what the state can prove, I did not kill Ms. Nam. I didn't pull the trigger. I wasn't even inside or knew of any intention to inflict harm upon whoever was inside the store."</p> <p>But Judge James Orlando didn't buy it, sentencing Thompson to 40 years in prison. "I believe Mr. Thompson is dangerous. I believe he has a propensity for significant violence in the future.</p> <p>2019 was a tragic year for several Korean-American owners. Cha Choe was murdered in a robbery at her Lakewood convenience store. Puyong Sun "Sunny" Ryan was killed at her Lakewood barber shop. Jae Ahn was stabbed to death in his Everett convenience store April 22nd.</p> <p>Former federal way mayor Mike Park says all four were just trying to work hard in their new country. "Korean-American is hardworking ethnic group trying to survive in the 'land of opportunity' in a great country. but small businesses are very difficult and tough to operate in this environment."</p>
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HEADLINE	<b>01/21 Redmond police: arrest; strip mall arson fire</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.q13fox.com/news/redmond-man-accused-of-arson-after-strip-mall-fire-destroys-2-business-damages-3-others">https://www.q13fox.com/news/redmond-man-accused-of-arson-after-strip-mall-fire-destroys-2-business-damages-3-others</a>
GIST	<p><b>REDMOND, Wash.</b> - A 23-year-old man is accused of arson after a Redmond strip mall fire destroyed two businesses and damaged three others on Jan. 14.</p> <p>The fire happened around 4:30 a.m. in the 16000 block of Northeast 87th Street. Several units from multiple agencies responded to the scene</p> <p>Fire officials told FOX 13 News that there are six businesses in the strip mall.</p> <p>Two businesses were destroyed, and three others damaged, according to police. No injuries were reported.</p> <p>Police said the suspect, Tyndale Cubbo Santos Mariur, was charged on Jan. 20 with second-degree arson and second-degree burglary.</p> <p>He was arrested on unrelated charges on Jan. 19.</p>
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